



THE TALES OF
Book IV

MARIELLE CLARAC

The Wedding of Marielle Clarac

Author: Haruka Momo *Illustrator: Maro*

VISIT...

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The cover features a central illustration of a young man with blonde hair and glasses, wearing a military-style uniform, looking down with a tearful expression. A young woman with long brown hair, wearing a white wedding dress and veil, stands behind him, holding his hand. The background is a blue and white gothic-style window with hanging flower petals. The title 'The Wedding of Marielle Clarac' is written in a decorative banner at the bottom, with the author 'Haruka Momo' and illustrator 'Maro' listed below it. The top left corner has a circular emblem with the text 'THE TALES OF Book IV MARIELLE CLARAC'.

THE TALES OF

Book IV

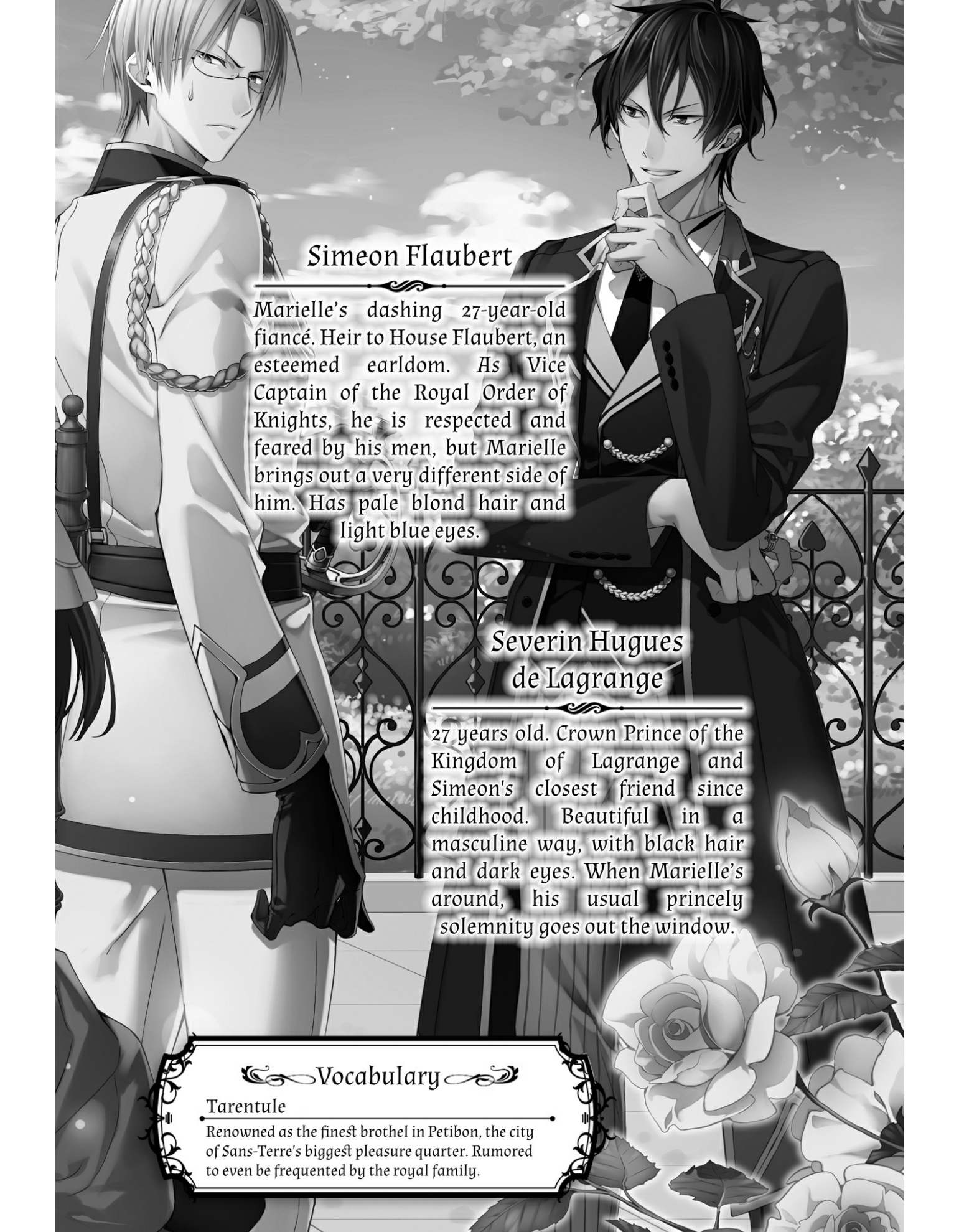
MARIELLE CLARAC

The Wedding of Marielle Clarac

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro



The Wedding
of *Marielle Clarac*



Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 27-year-old fiancé. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. As Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, he is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

Vocabulary

Tarentule

Renowned as the finest brothel in Petibon, the city of Sans-Terre's biggest pleasure quarter. Rumored to even be frequented by the royal family.



✿ Julianne Sorel

Marielle's best friend. An avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content.

✿ Aurelia Cavaignac

Daughter of Marquess Cavaignac. Has blonde hair, green eyes, and stunningly good looks.

✿ Emile Clarac

Marielle's father, Viscount Clarac. Appears to be friendly and cordial, but has a hard-nosed side to him as well.

✿ Lutin

An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.

✿ Nigel Shannon

The ambassador from the neighboring country of Easdale. The nephew of an important duke. Has honey-colored hair and eyes and golden brown skin, reflecting his heritage from the southern land of Shulk.

✿ Adrien Flaubert

24 years old. The middle son of House Flaubert. A naval officer assigned to Gandia. Has returned home for his brother's wedding.

✿ Noel Flaubert

15 years old. The youngest son of House Flaubert. Appears at first glance to have a sweet and angelic disposition.

✿ Olga

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. An intellectual type with brown hair.

✿ Isabelle

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. A glamorous lady with red hair.

✿ Chloe

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. A blonde who presents a cutesy image.

Marielle Clarac

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.

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Chapter One

What girl hasn't dreamed of being a bride?

Donning a pure white dress, holding a bouquet, and walking down the aisle. Pulling a long train and veil behind oneself accompanied by organ music. What girl hasn't imagined that beautiful and solemn spectacle from a young age, thinking, "One day, that will be me"? Even I had genuine expectations, not mere delusions, of fulfilling this dream.

I thought to myself, given my plain and unremarkable nature, a storybook romance is too much to wish for, but even so, I can still expect to be someone's bride. Even if the marriage itself is born purely out of obligation and calculated self-interest, I would still be able to wear a bridal gown one day, just as I had always longed to. That alone was enough for me to look forward to it with eager anticipation.

But I got far more.

The bells rang out. Flower petals rained down upon me. The man who awaited me at the holy altar was the precious object of my affections. A man of tall stature, with a strikingly beautiful face and a piercingly intelligent gaze. He stood there, as dignified as a white lily, overflowing with youthful charm. Our eyes met and joy welled up in me. I had to fight the urge to run straight to him. What a surprise—and what a pleasure. I was to be wedded to the man I loved. A storybook romance had found me after all.

The day had arrived at last for us to pledge ourselves to one another. He and I would finally be married. I made my way down the red carpet that lined the aisle in a graceful manner, but inside I was exhilarated, my heart pounding so fast it felt as though it might break into a dance. Even now I didn't quite believe that I could truly be experiencing such joy. For one's heart to be pounding with love—wasn't that a sensation only felt by characters in books?

Not much further now. Soon I'll be by his side. His smile was fixed directly on me. Even now, I thought, *He looks so much like a scoundrel.* Despite his sweet

smile that could melt any woman's heart, a sense of him being somehow black-hearted still hung in the air. Was it because of his glasses, and the cold aura they conveyed? In any case, he was no ordinary young man. What was he thinking underneath that smile? What scheme was afoot? His smile hid his calculating mind the way his clothes hid his finely honed body. He was the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, feared by all. *My goodness, even though we are here before God, and even though a bride is supposed to be pure, I simply cannot stop my mind from running wild.* The concept of a man being a brutal black-hearted military officer, yet on the surface appearing to be such an upstanding bridegroom—how could I ever get enough of that? *This beautiful exterior is hiding a demon! And he's my own fiancé—my husband-to-be. I'm fangirling so hard, I'm sure to die!*

Internally I was rolling on the floor in sheer agony, but I maintained the face of a virtuous bride at all costs. I was a bride at last, just as I had always yearned to be. I had to remain strong—to at least *appear* pure. *Please, God, I implore you to overlook my internal fangirling.*

I kept my ladylike poise all the way to the altar, where he offered me his large hand. I offered mine in return, and we gently clasped them together.

Just then came a drawn out shriek as the doors opened forcefully. “STOP THE WEDDING!”

I turned around in shock. A lone man stumbled into the room looking highly agitated.

“Miss Vivier! Before getting married, you *must* submit your manuscript!”

It was my editor at the publishing company. His hair and clothes looked disheveled, and his eyes were bloodshot; he appeared as though he might have been up all night.

“You'll never meet your deadline! I can't let you go on your honeymoon like this!”

“What?” I replied, blanching. “No, it can't be. What deadline? When!?”

I tried to think. Hadn't I already completed the submission? When was the next deadline after that? I had forgotten about it entirely. I hadn't even written

a single line!

“I’m sorry, but I can’t! Please delay the deadline until my return!”

“We can’t delay it any further! The printing presses are ready and waiting! We need you to submit the manuscript immediately!”

“But I told you, there’s no way!”

I drew back, retreating from the looming editor. I tried to hide behind my groom, but my arms found nothing but thin air. When I turned to look, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Lord Simeon!?”

In a panic I darted my head this way and that. Finally I saw him. At some point he had moved away to quite a distant spot. He was speaking words I could tell were directed at me, but I couldn’t hear them.

“Lord Simeon!”

I began dashing towards him. I hitched up my dress and ran with no concern for my appearance at all. But a number of people around me became determined to slow me down. They reached out their arms to obstruct me and cried out, “Manuscript!” “Deadline!”

What is this horror? I’m being attacked by deadline demons!

“Noooo!” I yelled. “Lord Simeoon!”

I ran as if my life depended on it, and somehow I reached him again. I leapt forward, expecting his dependable embrace to await me as always, but his arms did not move at all.

“Lord Simeon?”

Driven by apprehension, I looked up at his face and was struck by the chilling glare of his light blue eyes. With a cruel smile on his beautiful face, he said, “First things first. I can hardly marry a woman who doesn’t keep to her deadlines.”

I froze.

“If you want the reward, you must prove that you deserve it. You’re a bad girl,

begging for treats without even doing a trick first.”

Good heavens.

At that point, I crumbled. *What a cold smile! What unforgiving words! There it is, the object of my desires—the brutal black-hearted military officer. Thank you for letting me savor it!*

“I could die from this degree of joy. I would leave this world with no regrets.”

As I woke up, I uttered, “No you wouldn’t.” I couldn’t help arguing against my own final words in the dream. How could I not have regrets? I’d be full of them. I’d have died before getting married!

I heard a lethargic voice through the window. “My lady, is everything all right? I heard an...interesting noise.”

I noticed I had fallen onto the floor of the carriage. In a weary tone I replied, “Everything’s fine. I’m just a little sleepy, that’s all.”

“Rather a noisy way of being sleepy!” laughed the driver.

I sighed and lifted myself up off the floor. *Ugh, my whole body hurts.* It seemed that when I fell I had hit myself in various places, particularly my leg.

But there was something more important than that. I looked around and located my handbag, which had indeed dropped to the floor as well. I quickly took out my notebook and pen from inside. The very instant I had climbed back up to my seat, I set my pen racing feverishly.

I have to write down that line Lord Simeon used just now! I can’t let that fangirl feeling disappear along with my dream—it would be a terrible waste. I have to make a full record of his tone and his expression while it’s all fresh in my memory!

“‘You’re a bad girl’... How irresistible! It’s as sly and calculating as can be! How I’d love to hear the real Lord Simeon say it!”

I knew exactly why I’d had such a dream. Up till yesterday I had been desperately fighting to meet my deadline, and I had only barely made my submission in time. The part of the dream where my long-awaited wedding day had been ruined was terrible, of course, but that last line of his was simply so

delicious. It was honestly hard for me to decide if it had been a pleasant dream or a nightmare.

I kept writing, struggling against the shaking of the carriage, as I rode on through the morning sunlight. My destination was the headquarters of the Royal Order of Knights on the palace grounds, where the real Lord Simeon awaited.

Today, with all our work and other tasks taken care of, we would finally be able to enjoy a day in the city together. As I woke up more fully, the memory of the dream drifted further and further away, and I began to feel a sense of excitement instead. I held my pen still and lifted my head to look through the window at the late spring scenery flying past. The weather was good today, so I could expect it to be slightly hot in the afternoon. The sun's rays were so bright, one could almost think it was summer.

The grass and leaves were a vibrant shade of green, and flowers in full bloom rivaled one another with their beauty, drawing butterflies and honeybees to them. Chicks were hatching in swallows' nests, while frogs croaked cheerfully by the waterside. The breeze rushing in through the open window was refreshing and carried a sweet scent.

In this splendid season filled with the breath of life, I was to experience my moment of bliss. Just two days hence—the day after tomorrow—my real wedding ceremony would take place.

A great deal had happened since we got engaged, but now that we were so close, there was nothing left to do but push toward the finish line. There was nothing in our way now, just endless joy before us.

The carriage continued its rhythmic journey, while I sat inside, the happiest person in the entire world. Eventually a road stretched out directly before us with a large gate standing at the end of it.

I had made my debut into high society at the age of fifteen. Three years later, it had finally been my turn to receive a marriage proposal.

I was a thoroughly mediocre young lady from a mid-level viscountcy with no particular history or fortune—a house not worthy of any special mention. My hair and eyes were a mundane shade of brown, and I couldn't manage without

my glasses. Compared to the beautiful young ladies that congregated in society, I was too plain to even be called a wallflower. From the time of my debut, I had been nothing. I was a being who garnered no attention from anyone.

But that was not something I lamented. On the contrary, I enjoyed it. I hid in the corners of society, outside the world of the young ladies who put all their efforts into finding a superior husband. I blended into the background and observed the people around me. My secret identity as a romance author led me to chase after love not for myself, but to include in my books. I spent my life collecting reference material.

Worried for my future, my father sought a fiancé for me—and, unexpectedly, the one he found was Lord Simeon, the eldest son of a prestigious earldom called House Flaubert.

There was no one in society who was not aware of this storied house that dated back to the founding of the kingdom. They had produced generations of ministers, even prime ministers, and the previous earl had gone from being a general to the Minister of Military Affairs. The current earl was more academically minded, but the heir, Lord Simeon, was the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, a military branch that served as the royal guard. He was the confidant of His Highness the Crown Prince, and it was common gossip that he might one day become the Minister of Military Affairs himself.

Comparing my family's status and accomplishments with his, it became clear right away that he was in no way someone I should expect to be marrying. This was without even mentioning that Lord Simeon was such a dashing handsome young man, he could be Prince Charming out of a fairy tale.

With his pale blond hair and light blue eyes, his fair complexion and his tall, slender body, he was not only handsome, but refined—a man with a noble air about him. He set every young lady's heart racing. In fact, aside from His Highness, Lord Simeon was the most eligible bachelor in Lagrange's royal court.

For such a desirable man to be matched with me was too absurd to even be called a mismatch. Everyone reacted with blank confusion in their eyes, and even I wondered if it was the result of some underhanded business. But the truth was stranger than fiction, and never in my wildest dreams would I have

guessed it. He had in fact noticed me several years earlier, and developed feelings for me.

Life is simply full of surprises. Even an everyday existence that appears mundane can have sparkling fragments dotted about. By looking for each one, and collecting them all, I have been able to build my happiness with him. And now I can keep walking with him forever.

We had watched the leaves fall together, and the snow, waiting for the warm weather to return. I had turned nineteen, and roses had finally begun to bloom in the garden. They signaled that I was about to leave my girlhood years behind and become his wife. The moment was fast approaching.

Despite some measure of sadness at leaving the nest, my excitement for the start of my new life was many times greater—and now there were only two days left. One often heard of people feeling anxious or melancholy before getting married, but any such ideas were completely foreign to me.

I spent every day feeling happy, and today was no exception. I knew I would be happy forever.

The gate opened before me. Beyond it, the smiling face of my beloved would be waiting.

Chapter Two

There was a reason we were going on an excursion to the city together with our wedding ceremony only two days away.

I'm sure anyone who heard the reason would roll their eyes, and my family had scolded me quite thoroughly for it, but the truth was, we were still not in possession of our wedding rings. Yes, the rings, which formed such a crucial element of the ceremony, were still at the jewelry store. There was no way we could simply leave them there and have the wedding without them.

They had been ordered quite some time ago, and it had also been a while since we received word that they were ready. However, I had been writing intensively, and Lord Simeon had also been working flat out to enable him to take a long break after the wedding. This meant we hadn't been able to see each other for roughly half a month. We had each been so inundated, there simply hadn't been any time to go and get them. And before that...well, all sorts of things had happened. This task had fallen by the wayside, put off until later.

We could have had them delivered rather than going to pick them up ourselves, of course. We would have resorted to that if we really couldn't have gotten them in time otherwise. Still, if at all possible I wanted to go there myself, and I wanted Lord Simeon to go too. It was important to me. These were the wedding rings—an important symbol. I wanted to collect them with him.

It was purely my own wish, and perhaps an unreasonable one, but fortunately I had managed to submit my manuscript to my editor the previous day, and Lord Simeon, too, was completing his final checks and handovers today, ready to start his vacation. It was arranged that he would go into work only in the morning, and I would go to meet him. Then we would leave together and ride to the jewelry store. We would also enjoy a final day together as an unmarried couple. My older brother found this rather ridiculous when I mentioned it —“What difference does that make? You'll be living together for the rest of

your lives!”—but as far as I was concerned, that was entirely different. This was the unique pleasure of arranging a time to meet and going out to spend time with one another.

Since I hadn’t seen him in a while, my anticipation had built up even more than usual. I was excited about the day ahead of me, but also the many days still to come. Whenever I remembered that the wedding was only two days away, I felt so restless I could hardly wait. *I must be careful I don’t let my good cheer get the better of me! I wouldn’t want to embarrass myself somehow.*

The gate my carriage was approaching was the Bonheur gate, on the western side of the palace. Since I was going straight to the knights’ official quarters, I was entering via the side gate nearest to them.

Lord Simeon had given advance notice of my arrival, so I was let through with barely any wait at all. My carriage proceeded through, and when I arrived at the parking area in front of the building, a carriage bearing the Flaubert crest was already standing by.

When I got out, the driver from House Flaubert, a man I was well acquainted with, doffed his hat and greeted me, “Good morning, my lady.” From this point, he would take over from my own driver, who was to return home straight away. My family only had one carriage, so if I occupied it all day it would be rather inconvenient for the others.

“Good morning, Joseph,” I replied. “You’re here early, I see.”

“This plan’s been in the offing for so long, I’d hate to be late for it. Besides, the young master is always so scrupulous about his own timekeeping. I’d have expected him to be here already, in fact. Odd that he’s not.”

Joseph got out a pocket watch and showed it to me. It was almost the time we’d agreed upon. Indeed, Lord Simeon always arrived early, though he did also find it hard to get away from work. Had he been waylaid by someone?

“Let me take a quick look and see what’s going on.” I turned to my own driver. “Marc, thank you for your hard work today. You can go home.”

“Is it safe to leave you here without waiting for Lord Simeon’s arrival?”

I hadn’t brought a lady’s maid with me, so my driver was expressing

reasonable concern. The daughter of a good family shouldn't really have been walking around on her own, and the palace grounds were the place I should have been *most* concerned about keeping up appearances. Still, it was fine. This wasn't a social gathering place frequented by nobles, and it wasn't as though anyone ever noticed me walking alone in any case. Whoever I encountered would no doubt look right past me as though I was a part of the scenery. Besides, today I wanted to enjoy some time alone with Lord Simeon—just the two of us. If I had brought an attendant, it would be annoying for them to be forced to stay with us all day, hence I had left the house without one.

“Thank you, it's quite all right. It's enough that you've seen me this far. He's just inside there, after all.”

The knights' official quarters were right in front of us. After reassuring my driver and sending him home, I walked towards the building.

All of the palace buildings had blue roofs, and this one, standing three stories high, was no exception. Though its exterior wasn't as richly decorated as that of the main palace, it had a grand majesty of its own. The path to the entrance was also lined with flowerbeds, preserving the ornate palace atmosphere. I knew that behind the building were the stables and the training grounds, which were so vast and imposing they felt somewhat out of place, but that unseemly sight was hidden from view by trees and plants.

I had come here many times by now, so I was light on my feet as I made for the front door. However, countless men in white uniforms were rushing past me in both directions. The knights walked briskly and with stern faces—quite a different character than was typical of the normal palace staff. Not wishing to get in anyone's way, I waited outside for a few minutes, walking through the door only when I found a suitable moment without a continual stream of foot traffic.

The marble-floored entrance hall had a reception office at one side. There was a counter that usually had a knight on duty waiting to receive visitors, but he must have stepped away for a moment, since the desk was unmanned. I could hear voices talking, so I walked closer to the counter and peered inside.

They appear to be rather preoccupied.

A high-ranking member of the palace staff was scolding a group of knights, delivering a lecture in a very angry tone. I didn't feel comfortable interrupting, so I waited a short while, hoping that one of them might notice me there. No one did, however—except one who stood facing me, and he seemed to be studiously ignoring my presence. Was he trying to tell me that now was not the time? I thought for a moment, then silently left the reception counter.

I was already familiar with the building's layout—I knew it like the back of my hand, in fact—so I didn't need anyone to show me around. There was no point in making a nuisance of myself, so I decided I'd avoid taking up any of their time and walked toward the staircase on my own.

Lord Simeon's office was on the second floor. I stayed close to the wall and proceeded quietly, as though I had become one with the shadows. This was a workplace, so I wanted to avoid disturbing anyone. *I'll just go and see what Lord Simeon is up to and ask if it's still likely to take a while. It's not an urgent visit, so there's no need to cause any great fuss. I'll aim to move as casually and inconspicuously as I can.*

I put on a face that said everything was entirely normal, but given that I was as quiet as I could possibly manage, I don't believe any of the people walking past noticed me at all. Perhaps they were too busy to pay attention to their surroundings, or maybe they thought I was a female servant who had entered the knights' quarters on some errand or another. Nobody tried to stop me, and I reached the second floor without incident.

I looked along the corridor in the direction of Lord Simeon's office, and my eyes caught a group of people walking into the distance. One of the backs that faced me was particularly dignified, and atop it was a head of pale blond hair, cut short in a style suitable for the military. He walked with a cadence that was measured, forceful and fluid. Even at this distance, I couldn't mistake him. It was Lord Simeon.

As soon as I saw him, my heart leapt with joy. I thought about calling out to him, but he proceeded with swift footsteps, the knights around him keeping pace so as not to fall behind. The group was rapidly getting further and further away, so I hurriedly gave chase.

Before I could catch up, they walked into a room at the end of the corridor—one I recalled was a meeting room. I stopped in front of the door and stood still, unsure of what to do next.

They must be having a meeting in there, so I shouldn't interrupt. Should I go and wait in Lord Simeon's office? But, hmm, I can't be sure he'll even go back to it before leaving.

Ever so gently, I put my ear to the door and listened. I could only barely hear the voices inside; I couldn't make out what they were discussing. They were speaking in low tones and I couldn't hear any laughter, so it had to be a serious meeting.

It seemed odd that Lord Simeon would have a meeting scheduled for the time he'd arranged to meet me, but knowing him, there was no way he had forgotten about me. Some sort of urgent problem had no doubt arisen.

All the more reason that I can't interrupt. Could it be that the reception staff had already received a message that I wouldn't be able to see Lord Simeon today? My shoulders slumped at the possibility.

Lord Simeon was Captain Poisson's right-hand man and was responsible for the day-to-day command of the forces. If trouble was afoot, he would spring into action even if it was his vacation. Sudden changes of plan were hardly unusual. I understood the nature of his work, but I had still wished so badly for today, at least, to go according to plan. I had looked forward to it so much, and worked so hard for it. Would I really be forced to pick up the rings on my own?

Dejected, I moved my head back from the door. For now, I decided I would go back downstairs and ask at reception properly. Perhaps our day out hadn't been called off yet after all.

I stealthily turned on my heel, suppressing my presence to avoid being noticed by those in the room. I was about to start walking, but just before I did, the door opened without any forewarning at all.

I hadn't even heard any footsteps coming toward the door, so I found myself glued to the floor in alarm. *At least the door opened inward,* I thought to myself. *If it opened outward, it would have crashed into me.*

But that was far from the biggest shock. Before I could react, I saw metal glinting before my eyes. The blade of a saber was pointed at me, almost touching the end of my nose.

I held my breath. *Heavens above!*

“Marielle!?” came a voice that sounded almost as surprised as I was. The one who had drawn his sword while opening the door was none other than Lord Simeon. “What on earth are you doing!?”

Upon realizing it was me, he quickly withdrew his saber. His beautiful face held a mixture of astonishment and impatience—and perhaps a smidgen of anger.

“Lord Simeon, now would be the perfect moment for you to call me a ‘bad girl,’ if you don’t mind!”

“If you’re aware that eavesdropping is bad, then I’d suggest you shouldn’t do it!”

The real Lord Simeon did not denigrate me with a cruel smile. He always scolded me seriously. Such a shame, when if he’d used a devastatingly brutal line, I’d have pumped my fist in the air in joy! Even so, Lord Simeon had seemed so dashing in that moment. He had been so threatening that it was as if to say: if you move an inch, I’ll kill you. Scary, yes, but it set my fangirl heart racing! What an unexpected pleasure to get such a close-up view of the Demon Vice Captain in action. I was glad I’d come to look for him.

But the people inside the room were listening, so I concealed my fangirl glee and apologized. “I’m sorry. Only, I couldn’t make out any of what you were discussing, so I can’t say I eavesdropped successfully. In any case, I have to ask how you noticed me. Until that point, no one had even registered my presence since I entered the building. Not the people at reception, nor any of those who walked past me. How did you detect me from the other side of the door?”

For a moment, Lord Simeon simply wore a terrible grimace and pressed his fingers to his forehead. Then he said, “I don’t know who I should scold first, you for trespassing so brazenly or the men for failing to notice an intruder right under their noses. But to answer your question, of *course* I’d detect you. Why did nobody else!?”

I cocked my head and said, "Good question."

Directly afterwards, I suffered a sudden blow to the head. A man now stood by Lord Simeon's side, still holding his fist in the air. "Feigning ignorance, are we? I daresay you were hiding your presence in a manner fit for a bloody assassin!"

His anger struck just as shockingly as his fist had. I rubbed my head. "Your Highness, don't you think your treatment of me is rapidly becoming unconscionable?"

"It's no more than you deserve!"

This black-haired and dark-eyed gentleman, his masculine beauty now contorted with rage, was the kingdom's crown prince. Evidently Prince Severin had also been attending the meeting.

Through the open door, I could see that Captain Poisson was also present, as were the Order's squadron leaders. Lord Simeon's aide, Alain, was there as well. Each of them looked back at me, half-surprised and half-exasperated, but with a slight hint of amusement in their eyes. My gaze met that of the Captain, who sat at the head of the table, so I delivered a curtsy. "I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your meeting. It's clear that you're busy, so I should have left and come back later."

"Oh, it's no bother," the Captain replied. "You had an appointment with Simeon today, didn't you? Goodness, it's that late already."

The Captain answered in a melodious tone, without any anger, and he looked at the time somewhat pointedly. He was a fine older gentleman, as befitting of the Royal Order of Knights, but on occasion his personal appearance did feel sloppy. Today, for example, his face was covered in stubble. He was said to be an easy person to get along with, but one must avoid being lulled into a false sense of security. Despite his otherwise cheerful expression, there was no smile in his eyes.

However, it did not appear that he was annoyed at *me*.

"On the contrary," he continued, "I'm sorry that we kept you waiting. In addition, we benefited from an unexpected test of our defensive capabilities,

which it turns out are somewhat lacking. Allow me to thank you for your assistance, Miss Marielle.”

Still smiling, he cast a sharp glare at the knights. Their shoulders slumped.

Lord Simeon returned his saber to its scabbard and delivered a follow-up blow. “Indeed. All of you were closer to the door than I was, yet not one of you noticed Marielle’s presence. Simply pathetic. Clearly we’ve a need to revise our training protocols.”

Horror-stricken voices were raised immediately.

“What!? No!”

“If you make it even harsher, the recruits will be leaving in body bags!”

Lord Simeon’s frigid eyes and coldly glinting spectacles trembled even more violently, but the knights did not cease their pleading.

“Please, Vice Captain! You can’t expect everyone else to live up to your superhuman standards!”

“Miss Marielle is a special case! No one notices her even if she’s right there in front of them! How could we have known she was on the other side of the door!?”

“That’s right! Even a cat is more conspicuous than Miss Marielle!”

“Her stealth skills are not those of a mere amateur! They’re at the level of a first-rate professional!”

“You’re giving me far too much credit,” I interjected. “I was simply walking normally.”

“Don’t take it as a compliment!” came His Highness’s indignant voice again. “If you were walking normally, why would you be hiding your presence so thoroughly!?”

To avoid being punched a second time, I ran and hid behind Lord Simeon.



“It’s abnormal, I tell you,” His Highness continued. “Is everyone in House Clarac raised to be a covert operative?”

Captain Poisson stroked his chin. “Perhaps we should ask for their assistance with the induction course.”

“Just what I had in mind. Shall we summon the viscount?”

Stop, stop! If my father receives a summons from His Highness and the Captain, he’ll faint!

Lord Simeon sighed very deeply, then looked at both of them and lowered his head. “In any case, I’m sorry that we caused such a fuss during the meeting.”

I lowered my head as well. His Highness kindly contained his anger and returned to his seat beside the Captain. “It’s our fault for keeping you here past the agreed upon time,” said His Highness. “It’s only natural that Marielle came to find you. No harm done, anyway.” With a rather dismissive tone he added, “Go off and have your little rendezvous if you must.”

Captain Poisson clapped a hand on His Highness’s shoulder as if to console him, then said, “Quite right, it’s past time already. Lisnard!”

“Yes, sir!” said Alain, shooting to his feet in response to his name.

“As of this moment, you are to take on the mantle of substitute Vice Captain. The duration will be until Simeon’s return. Was the handover completed?”

“Yes, without issue. Substitute Vice Captain role acknowledged!”

Such a brisk exchange—so militaristic! Ah, how fantastic. I wish I could see more of this. I wonder if they’d let me conduct some interviews?

“No, wait,” interrupted Lord Simeon. Even though everyone was ready to let him go without further delay, he alone was unable to accept it. “You can’t expect me to leave now. We’re in the middle of a meeting.”

“One we can certainly continue without you,” said the Captain, flatly dismissing Lord Simeon’s excessive dedication. “The plan was always for you to have started your vacation by now. All the preparations were carried out with that expectation in mind, so I don’t expect to encounter any difficulties. I permit you to leave.”

“But—”

“Cease your grouching,” said His Highness with more than a hint of frustration. “The only peculiar part of all this is that you’re still here with your wedding just two days away. No wonder Marielle came to hunt you down. You have my permission, so kindly remove yourself from my sight. I’m thoroughly sick of watching you two flirt with one another. Begone.”

Most of his decorum had left him. *I suppose his own romantic endeavors have been rather fraught. I must do something to help him.*

Lord Simeon screwed up his face. “Flirt, you say?” But seeing the tepid gazes of the knights in the room, he grew embarrassed and cleared his throat. He gave a salute. “Very well, then allow me to presume upon your generosity and take my leave.”

“Excellent, then I’ll see you at the reception,” the Captain responded cheerfully.

His Highness, who had turned to look away, waved him off with a dismissive hand.

I curtsied, and Lord Simeon walked off silently, me chasing slightly behind him.

“I’m sorry, Lord Simeon,” I began, hesitating. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting. I just came in to see where you were, and when I realized you were busy, I honestly meant to leave again.”

“It was my choice to open the door...though you shouldn’t have simply ignored the reception counter and walked in on your own.” Lord Simeon did not turn around, but the anger had left his voice, replaced with a more gentle tone. He also slowed the pace of his footsteps to match mine.

“I did try,” I insisted. “They were so busy that no one acknowledged me. I didn’t feel comfortable interrupting them.”

Sighing, he shook his head and said to himself, “Upon my return, there will be a great deal of reevaluating and retraining...”

We did not go directly to the entrance, but first to his office. Initially I thought

this might be merely to pick up some things, but it turned out he was planning to get changed. “I’ll feel calmer when I’m out of uniform,” he explained.

He had brought a suitable change of clothes for our excursion. Clearly he had no intention of canceling our plans for the day, which was a relief—but I still felt a little concerned.

He placed a large bag onto a chair and opened it, then took out the clothes inside. After that he started gathering up the various papers on his desk.

As I watched him, I began to ask the questions that had been on my mind. “Are you sure you’re able to leave right now?”

“Yes,” he replied, “everything is fully prepared. I must apologize for making you wait due to an unexpected meeting.”

“But something’s happened, hasn’t it? Something rather serious. That’s why you were so reluctant to leave partway through.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have poked my nose in, but I knew this meeting was an exceptional case. If not, Lord Simeon wouldn’t have left me waiting when he knew the time we’d arranged to meet. When he had flung the door open, it had also been in a manner suggesting a higher level of threat than usual.

I continued, “There are some particular circumstances, ones that require you to be especially vigilant about eavesdropping. Isn’t that right?”

I wondered if the quarreling in the reception office could have been related to this as well. In general, the behavior of everyone in the building had felt different than usual today.

Lord Simeon shook his head with a wry smile. “You like to feign ignorance, but you’re awfully perceptive. A few days ago, there was an intruder in the area surrounding the palace’s treasure vault.”

He answered without resistance, almost as if this wasn’t top secret business.

“Goodness,” I replied. “And the culprit?”

“Well, it’s not as though we caught them in the act, as such. Rather, a particularly methodical member of staff noticed that a ledger was in a different place than it had been the day before, and reported it.”

“This member of staff sounds very much like you. And was anything taken?”

“No, the administrator spent an entire day investigating, but not a single thing was missing. It appears as though they didn’t enter the vault itself, only the administrator’s office.”

“Perhaps they intended to steal something, but abandoned those plans when they couldn’t find the key?”

“Perhaps,” he said, thinking for a moment. He shook his head. “We’ve so little to judge by, it’s hard to be sure.” He put all the papers into the bag, then put his hand on the saber at his waist. “When I heard the report, it seemed plausible that the goal was the ledger itself. Either way, the knight on duty failed to notice the intruder despite being specifically on the lookout for them. It was quite a blunder, to say the least. He received a rather harsh rebuke from above—and not only him.”

He removed his saber and leaned it against the chair. I nodded in understanding.

So that’s why everyone is so ill at ease today. No doubt the palace worker in the reception room had also barged in to voice his complaints. It was a relief that no substantial harm had been caused, but this was still a matter that could not be easily overlooked.

“It must be somewhat frustrating for you, starting your vacation at a time like this.”

This was Lord Simeon, after all—a serious man, and one obsessed with his work. My implicit suggestion that he might prefer to delay until he caught the criminal made the wry smile return to his face. “I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me, but as the Captain noted, it’s not as though my presence here is truly needed. It would be one thing if I had a more trivial reason for leaving, but I can hardly delay my own wedding. I can take the time off with a clear conscience.”

Lord Simeon spoke resolutely, in a tone that gave me the sense he was trying to reassure me.

I asked, “You’re absolutely sure?”

With a hint of a malicious smile he replied, “Would you prefer me to say otherwise?”

Ooh, dear me, it’s too wonderful. I love that villainous look so much. But I had to tell him no. I shook my head firmly. “I would find that *most* inconvenient.”

Lord Simeon let out a small chuckle and walked back over to me. He bent down slightly and whispered into my ear, “In that case, could I ask you to wait in the carriage? I’d find it rather embarrassing to get changed with you watching me so intently.”

Immediately, my cheeks burned. *Y-y-yes, I suppose it would be rude for me to linger too long. Observing a gentleman changing his clothes would be thoroughly improper. But, oh my word, his voice just now was so teasing, it gave me shivers.*

“Th-then if you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave right away. But first...”

“Yes?”

Still in the throes of fangirl passion, I looked up at Lord Simeon. “Could you show me your salute one more time? So clean and sharp!”

“My...salute?” Lord Simeon’s gentle expression faltered, replaced by one of bewilderment.

“When you delivered a salute just now, it was so wonderful! Combined with your uniform, the image is simply perfection! Lord Simeon, don’t you realize how devastatingly dashing your salute is? Please, before you change out of your uniform, let me see it one more time!”

Lord Simeon fell silent for a moment, and deep creases formed on his forehead. He closed his eyes as though he was suffering from a headache—but he must have felt somewhat bashful as well, because his pale cheeks turned a deeper shade.

“Also, could you draw your saber and hold it up to my face one more time? It was only for a moment just now, and that’s simply not enough. I want to really savor the fear and trepidation of being your target.”

“Savor? You wish to *savor* a thing like *that!*?” His blazing cheeks quickly

returned to normal, but the creases on his forehead became even deeper as he began to chide me. “Stop talking nonsense. Why would I ever intentionally turn my sword on you?”

“Don’t you see, it was far, far more captivating than simply watching it happen to someone else. That sense of menace, the feeling of being the prey you were hunting—it was all simply too much. I want to experience the brutal black-hearted military officer bearing down upon me one more time!”

“I am neither brutal nor black-hearted, I tell you!”

Brooking no further disagreement, he put his hands on my shoulders and turned me around, then pushed me into the doorway.

“But Lord Simeon!” I whined.

“A sword is not a toy. I don’t draw it for entertainment value. And before you start having any ideas, you mustn’t try to touch it without my knowledge either. It’s not something you should be handling at all.”

With those cold-hearted words, Lord Simeon shoved me out of the room. When I turned around sullenly, he gave a very resigned sigh, then delivered a swift salute.

Then he immediately closed the door. I crumpled to the ground, covering my face in my hands. *Goodness gracious, how unfair, how dastardly of him to launch a surprise attack like that! And how very attractive! Lord Simeon is simply so wonderful that I’ll fangirl myself to death. His looks are beautiful enough on their own, but then every movement he makes adds so much more that it’s practically a crime! Is he trying to kill me?*

This man was my fiancé. In just two days, he would be my husband.

Can it be real, I asked myself? Could I, the plainest of the plain with no remarkable qualities at all, truly have been blessed with such an incredible spouse?

I writhed in fangirl agony as I reflected upon my sheer joy. It seems that the sight of me trembling in front of the door did not blend into the background at all, and the knights who walked past saw me and tried to consciously avert their eyes.

Chapter Three

We visited the long-established jewelry store and successfully picked up the rings, and while we were out we stopped by another nearby shop as well. Afterwards, as I sat beside Lord Simeon in the clattering carriage, I looked down at my handbag in my lap. Inside was one box containing the rings and another containing two pairs of glasses. To accommodate all of this, I had brought a rather large handbag with me today.

I'd been looking forward to the glasses just as much as the rings. At last they were in my hands. My face flushed.

"And next we'll be visiting the department store, is that right?" Lord Simeon asked me. "Will we be having ice cream again?"

He gave the driver the instruction, then looked back at me with a slightly uncomfortable expression.

Smiling, I shook my head. "They only sell ice cream in winter."

"That comes as quite a relief," he confessed. From his look, it was clear he meant it sincerely, which made me smile all the more.

In the colder months, the two of us had made a trip to one of the most popular stores in the city of Sans-Terre, where it had become a major trend for lovers to share a bowl of ice cream. I was eager to give it a try, so I had Lord Simeon accompany me.

We each had to scoop the ice cream from the bowl and feed it to the other. Lord Simeon became far more embarrassed by this than he expected, but he manfully suppressed it, just as I suppressed the fact that I could have died of fangirling just from the sight of him.

There he was, the Demon Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, capable of silencing a crying child with a mere look, sitting with his mouth open waiting for ice cream to be spooned into it! Just like feeding a baby: here comes the little bird! An adorable sight that his subordinates could never imagine, I'm

sure. It was as though he was a different person altogether from the man who loomed so large in the palace. Some saw him merely as an overserious person, but when he drew his sword he was like the Grim Reaper, a powerful force capable of conceiving every manner of calculating plan. And yet, there he was, his mouth open, withstanding his discomfort while his handsome cheeks glowed bright red! I was struck by an urge to collapse onto the table and bang my fist against it.

Incidentally, word had spread from an acquaintance who caught sight of us that day, and it seemed that since then Lord Simeon had been on the receiving end of quite some mockery from the Captain—though the latter had thanked me for teaching Lord Simeon how to have fun like a young person.

Ice cream was a limited-time affair, available only in winter, so we wouldn't be able to enjoy it this time. The idea of eating something so cold did appeal in the warm weather, but since it can only be made when it's cold outside, there was no helping it.

"There won't be any ice cream," I replied, "but apparently they have a particular sort of pudding instead. An extravagant pudding garnished with lashings of chocolate and fruit."

"You're welcome to enjoy it on your own. The very thought of it makes my teeth hurt."

"Surely you could manage half the dish? It's meant to be shared."

"Is this another trend of yours?"

"It is indeed."

Winter can't be the only time for lovers to satisfy their romantic needs, now can it? Of course there would be a successor once the ice cream was all gone.

Lord Simeon cradled his head in his hands. Even so, he did not try to change the destination. Since he was normally so busy, he couldn't often spend time with me, which apparently made him more eager to keep pace with me to the best of his abilities. It made me glad.

Still, there would be no harm in eating the pudding on my own this time. For Lord Simeon it seemed rather akin to torture, so asking him to do it repeatedly

would make me feel awfully sorry for him.

Today I had already had the chance to fangirl over him looking menacingly dashing, so I decided that seeing him look cute and helpless could wait until another day. There was no need to demand everything all at once. *After all, when we're married I'll be able to see him every day—and I'm sure that I'll find a new reason to fangirl over him every day as well.* Thinking of that made me very excited.

With me in high spirits and Lord Simeon in a generous but perturbed mood, the carriage entered the city center, which shone brightly under the endlessly joyful blue sky.

In Lagrange's capital city of Sans-Terre, known as the city of flowers and famed as the birthplace of many trends, the current trendsetter was the department store known as Quatre Saisons. It had only opened last year and primarily targeted a middle-class clientele. Its main appeal seemed to be that it allowed customers for whom the upper-class specialty retailers were out of reach to enjoy a shopping experience that *felt* upper-class. So soon after opening, it already competed for the title of most popular store in the city. Today, as ever, it was very crowded.

Lord Simeon and I passed through the entrance, which opened up into an atrium. The high ceiling curved gracefully and was decorated with carvings and stained glass, almost giving it the atmosphere of a church. This atrium was the pride of the store, and any customers who walked through the door could not help gazing up at it.

Arm in arm with Lord Simeon, I glanced around. "It's changed rather a lot." Even though the splendid atrium was the same as before, the sales areas I could see had been updated quite significantly. Invigorating shades caught the eye wherever I looked, drawing attention to the collections of summer goods.

We had planned to go directly to the cafe, but Lord Simeon asked, "Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to shop for a while first?"

I thought for a moment, then nodded. "Actually, I wouldn't mind looking at the stationery department, if that's all right."

In the lead-up to the wedding I had already bought plenty of makeup and

accessories, and had received some as gifts from Lord Simeon as well, so I had no need to look around those areas. However, I can never resist the lure of charming writing paper and cards.

We passed by all sorts of different departments as we made our way through the vast interior. The variety was huge, from groceries and sundries, to items for gentlemen and for their wives, to sporting goods. Living up to the term “department store,” it had every department one could imagine. As a shopper, the idea of having everything under one roof was certainly appealing. Clearly, the large volume of customers was not only because this store was the talk of the town, but also because if one came here, there was no need to go anywhere else. As a business strategy, it was a winning one. Seeing how Quatre Saisons was flourishing, I wondered if the city’s specialty stores, currently so smug and proud, would have to change their approach at some point.

As we were walking past the hat department, I suddenly stopped. My eyes were drawn to a white hat with a wide brim.

The design was perfectly suited to the summer season that was nearly upon us. The brim was decorated with layers of lace and tied with a blue and white striped ribbon. The hat had a lovely artificial flower attached as well, the same light shade of blue as on the ribbon.

This would go so well with the dress I made to take on our honeymoon. The dress had white and blue stripes that matched this hat perfectly. I’ll admit that the shade of blue also reminded me of Lord Simeon’s eyes. Still, that dress would go with any white hat, so I hadn’t felt a need for a matching one.

And yet, this hat right before my eyes was so perfect, it was as though it had been custom-made for that purpose.

“You seem quite taken with it,” said Lord Simeon as I looked at it.

I pondered for a moment, but ultimately shook my head. “No, it just caught my attention, that’s all. The color scheme is a good match for a new dress of mine.”

I ushered Lord Simeon along and kept walking myself. The stationery department was just ahead.

I had definitely considered buying the hat, but I had made some new hats as well—three of them, in fact. Buying another would be an extravagance. I could simply add a light blue ribbon and artificial flower to a white hat I already had. This hat would serve as a good point of reference, but I didn't need to own it.

At last we reached our goal. I looked around, elated at the displays of seasonally themed writing paper and cards.

"Look at the kittens on these cards! Aren't they adorable? Whoever drew it must surely have a cat of their own. The way they stretch and stick out their bellies in summer is so perfectly depicted. Oh, they still have the ones with violets on them. These are so delightful as well, I can't even decide. Although, thinking about it, doesn't House Flaubert have writing paper and cards with its own crest on them? Even if I bought these, I might not have much occasion to use them."

"It won't be as rigid as that. For personal use, it's fine to use whatever stationery you prefer. There's no need to use House Flaubert stationery for casual letters to your friends, for example."

"But letters from you have always had the crest on them."

"I lack the mindset to choose that sort of thing based on taste. Apologies, I know I'm rather formal and stuffy." He picked up the cards with both the kitten and violet designs. "If you can't decide, we'll get both."

"Oh, but I..."

I reached out to take them out of his hands, but he politely blocked me. "When we're out together, I can hardly let you pay for them yourself." He said these words without hesitation, and without even a hint of pretension. His smile was kind, and his gaze was so sweet. *How can he be so attractive!?*

I wanted to tell him, *Honestly, at least be aware of your own princely beauty! And remember that you're normally a military man with a penetrating gaze that conveys the impression of a vicious scoundrel. When you do me such a lovely favor, the contrast makes me fangirl over you twice as hard. It's simply far too delicious to see the black-hearted military officer acting like a fawning lover!*

"Marielle?"

“I’m lost. I’ve wandered too deep into the woods.”

“What woods!?”

Lord Simeon bought me the cards, and now I had three treasures in my handbag. My spirits only rose further as we made our way to the cafe.

The cafe took up a large area on the first floor. Surrounded by large potted plants, it was a quiet space with an atmosphere distinct from the rest of the store. The seats by the windows let one look out at the hubbub of the city. The tea and refreshments were delicious enough that plenty of people came to Quatre Saisons purely with those in mind. Then, once they were inside, they’d inevitably develop a desire to look around and start shopping. The proprietor of this store truly was an expert at attracting business.

A waiter led us to a table inside the cafe and we sat down on the comfortable seats. Once we had finished ordering, Lord Simeon unexpectedly stood up again. “If you’ll excuse me one moment, there’s something I’d like to take care of. Would you mind waiting here?”

“Shall I ask them to bring your tea a little later?”

“No, I’ll be back soon,” he said casually, then left.

Did he need to use the facilities, perhaps? I had told him he didn’t need to share the pudding with me, so he couldn’t have been running away from that.

I watched him disappear behind the row of potted plants, then reclined back into my chair. I was at a loose end until my pudding arrived, so I glanced down at my handbag, which I’d placed on the floor beside me. I lifted it into my lap and looked inside, where the rings, the glasses, and the cards were all present and correct. Just looking at them made a smile creep across my face.

I gently took out the box housing the glasses. I undid the clasp, opened the lid and moved the protective cushioning out of the way. There before me lay two pairs of glasses. The designs were quite different: one pair for a man and one for a woman. Lord Simeon’s were drawn with sharper lines that conveyed an intellectual feel, while mine curved more softly. In other people’s estimation these would be no more than nondescript glasses, but they held hidden symbols that only the two of us knew about.

My pair had a design of small lilies on the arms. These pure white flowers that bloom with a dignified air around the time of Lord Simeon's birthday reminded me of his own nature. Lord Simeon's pair, meanwhile, had violets engraved on the insides of the arms.

I had thought that roses might be the best flower to remind him of me, but Lord Simeon suggested violets instead. *Yes, I like violets most of all. They're much more like me than roses are, I think. I wonder when he observed that?* He had never seemed like the sort of person to be concerned with different types of flowers, so it made me very happy that he chose violets.

We would keep the flowers that symbolized one another close to our bodies. As frivolous and girlish as this idea of mine was, he did not express any mockery or disdain. He had even taken the time to go with me to order them during a period when he was rather busy. This was an aspect of Lord Simeon's character that I truly loved. Though he himself worried that he was overly formal and quick to complain, I knew there was far more to him than that. He was also thoughtful and open-minded enough to avoid denying other people the things they value and enjoy. *Even my own interests, which my family often grow sick of, he tries to understand as well as he can. I could definitely never have found another husband as wonderful as him.*

As I looked at the glasses, I smiled again. I closed the lid, shut the clasp tightly, and returned the box to my handbag. Next I took out another box, small enough to fit inside my grasp. Needless to say, inside this box were the wedding rings.

Two golden rings, lined up neatly beside one another. I couldn't help grinning even more broadly.

At that moment, I heard someone hurrying toward me. I assumed Lord Simeon had returned, and I closed the box.

But when I looked up, the man standing before me was one I had never seen before. He was slightly too young to be described as middle aged, and had an abundance of tidily combed chestnut-colored hair. He was a well-groomed and well-dressed man. However, he had a rather haggard appearance, with very distinct dark circles under his bloodshot eyes.

Wh-what's going on? Given his clean appearance, and my current location, it seemed unthinkable that he was a mugger, but in my unease I pushed the ring box back into my bag.

"Give it back," said the man, putting out his hand.

"Excuse me?"

I reflexively shrank back, but he ignored me and pressed in closer.

"Give that back. Now!"

I had a faint sense that I recognized his ghastly face, but no sooner did I think that than he grabbed my handbag and violently pulled it away from me.

"What? No! What are you—"

Panicking, I pulled it back. It had seemed so impossible, but was he a mugger after all!?

"Give it back!" he demanded.

"No matter how many times you say that, this is my own handbag!" I held it in my arms while he tried to wrench it away. Perhaps he wasn't a mugger as such—perhaps it was some sort of misunderstanding? "You're mistaken, I assure you! Look again!"

"Now look here, I came here with the item you demanded! I have it here, I'll give it to you! So I insist you give that back right now!"

It seemed my words had gone in one ear and out the other. The man held up a package in his free hand and forcefully pushed it onto me.

What is going on here? What sort of mix-up is this? I could do nothing but try to keep hold of my bag at all costs. I shook my head at him. "As I said, you are mistaken! I haven't demanded anything! I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Give it back!"

Ugh, he's not listening to a word I say. This is serious. I must call for help.

I cast my eyes around for the waiter. The patrons nearby were also looking in my direction. Several men stood from their seats and began to walk towards us.

Did they mean to come and help, having witnessed this strange commotion? If so, that brought some reassurance—but it was no use. A moment later, his strength overpowered mine and the bag was ripped from my hands.

“Stop!”

In an instant, he had turned around and made a run for it. In my state of panic, I gave chase as well. I kept hold of the package, which he had not so much handed to me as thrown at me, and pushed through the crowds of shoppers, apologizing to them as I went.

“Please, wait!” I cried out. “That’s my bag! You’ve confused me with someone else!”

But the man did not even turn his head to look. He only grew further and further away, leaving me behind. My dress slowed me down, and no matter how hard I ran, he was a man and I was a woman—I would certainly never catch up to him.

At the top of my lungs I shouted, “Someone stop that man! He took my bag!”

But just as I did, I stumbled over something on the floor. This sent me colliding into a nearby display cabinet, and from there I couldn’t regain my balance and I hurtled to the floor with a mighty crash. Screams and gasps rose up around me as I hit the ground and numerous other items fell down on top of me. I ended up pinned beneath the cabinet I had knocked over.

“Miss!” shouted a shop assistant, kindly rushing over and lifting the cabinet off me. Thankfully it was fairly small and not too heavy. Around me, the floor was littered with an array of small goods.

“Are you all right?” the shop assistant stammered, helping me sit up. I ached all over, but that wasn’t my biggest concern right now. I lifted my head and looked for any sign of the man nearby.

I groaned. He was gone. Beyond the crowd of people that had amassed to focus on me, there was no sign of him at all.

I looked all around, but it made no difference. He was long gone. While I was busy crashing to the ground, he had made his escape.

“This...can’t be...”

I put my hands on the ground but couldn’t make myself stand. My whole body was shaking. My head swam and I began to feel faint.

Inside my handbag were the glasses and rings. We had only just collected them.

“Miss, are you...all right? You’re not injured?”

I couldn’t even manage an answer to the shop assistant’s thoughtful inquiry. I didn’t know what to do. The shock was so great that my mind went completely blank.

“Marielle!”

As I wavered on the edge of consciousness, a well-projected voice reached my ears. Operating on instinct alone, I turned to look. As soon as I saw Lord Simeon running toward me, my fading consciousness returned.

“Lord Simeon...”

“What on earth happened? Can you stand?”

When he reached me, he kneeled down and put his hands on me to help me up. The instant I felt his warmth, the tears began to flow and I could not stop them.

“Marielle?”

“Lord Simeon!” Even though I knew we were in public, I couldn’t hold myself back. I clung onto him, sobbing convulsively. “The rings! They’ve been...!”

How could this have happened? How could our precious wedding rings have been stolen? The ceremony was in two days! We were about to pledge ourselves to one another before God! We had to place the rings on each other’s hands . What on earth would we do without them!?

This is... It’s simply...!

Surging feelings of despondency, indignation, and guilt tormented me all at once. “What are we going to do?” I said, crying, barely able to form the words.

Lord Simeon lifted me up into his arms. Then he turned to the shop assistant

and said, "I apologize for the fuss. If there are damages we must reimburse you for, please send the bill to House Flaubert."

In my mind I knew that I, too, had to apologize for the mess I'd made of this department, but the words wouldn't come out. All I could do was cry pathetically and let Lord Simeon carry me.

We returned to the cafe and Lord Simeon lowered me into a chair. He didn't sit down himself, but rather kneeled in front of me to check that I was uninjured. "Are you in pain at all?"

I buried my face in the handkerchief he offered me and silently shook my head. I didn't care about any pain. All that preoccupied me right now was regret.

If I had known this was going to happen, I would have stowed the bag in the carriage. I'd have left it in Joseph's care, as I should have done all along. Ladies weren't supposed to walk around holding every little item they bought while shopping. Leaving them all behind would have been the proper way to behave. Instead, I had gone out of my way to bring a large handbag. I wanted to feel the joy, the elation, of holding them close to me all afternoon.

And this was the result. Because I'd been so imprudent as to walk around with the precious rings, I had lost them.

"Marielle?"

It was all my fault. In a trembling voice I began, "I'm...sorry... We... We only just got them, and... I should have put them in the carriage..."

What would we do now? There were only two days until the wedding. Even if we ordered replacements they would never be ready in time. We could find some other rings to use as a stopgap, perhaps, but what would that mean for the treasured memories of this once-in-a-lifetime event?

"I'm...so sorry..."

"Marielle," he said, putting both hands on my cheeks. He lifted my head up and kissed me, absorbing my sobbing into himself. Gently, he kissed me over and over again to soothe me. Once my sobs had calmed down, he moved his lips away from mine and showered my eyelids and cheeks with warmth instead.

“It’s all right,” came his strong and kind voice, sliding into my ear. “You needn’t fret.”

As he held me in his arms, surrounding my body with his and stroking my back, my mind finally began to work properly again. Reason started to return at last. I let out a much-needed breath.

I pulled away from him and wiped away the tears still left in my eyes. I went to adjust my glasses and saw the remnants of tears on the lenses, so I wiped those too and then put them back on. I somehow managed to sit up with some measure of dignity.

“I’m sorry for falling to pieces so foolishly,” I said. “What a nuisance I made of myself.”

“That doesn’t matter all,” Lord Simeon replied. “I must ask again, are you truly not injured at all?”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head firmly. “I’m fine.”

His expression softened in relief. He pulled up a chair and sat close to me, then took my hands in his. “Based on what the shop assistant said, you encountered a purse snatcher?”

“A purse snatcher... Yes, you could call him that. I’m not entirely sure, but I had the impression he thought I was someone else. He had some sort of agreement to deliver a particular item, and he kept pressing me to ‘give back’ my handbag in exchange. Oh yes, he gave me a package,” I recalled in sudden confusion. “I wonder what happened to it?”

“Is this it?” asked Lord Simeon, showing me the very same package. “The shop assistant handed it to me thinking it was yours.”

It was an item with flat and even sides, clearly a box of some sort, wrapped tightly in newspaper. In terms of the boxes I’d had in my handbag, it was about twice the size of the glasses box. Upon unwrapping the newspaper, the box was revealed to be a rather fancy one covered in leather.

The center of the lid was branded with a stamp I recognized. “Bijoux Carpentier,” I said aloud.

I remembered this mark very well indeed—it belonged to the jewelry store we had visited that very day. The ring box that had been stolen from me bore the very same logo.

“The size of the box would suggest it’s a necklace,” said Lord Simeon.

“Yes, I’m quite sure you’re right.”

I opened the box. Encased in white silk was a shining display the likes of which I had never seen.

My mouth fell agape at the sight of the necklace. I had of course expected an item from such an established jewelry store to be decorated with gems. There was a certain level of beauty I had been anticipating. This, however, made me feel as though my own power of imagination was thoroughly inadequate. Perhaps I should have been upset with myself as an author? The necklace, with its countless diamonds, rubies, and pearls of all sizes, was shockingly gorgeous.

The platinum chain and setting created a design of climbing roses, into which the jewels were inlaid in a dense pattern, forming white and red roses. Were the pearls, decorating the spaces in between, meant to be the morning dew? In the center shone a ruby as large as a bird’s egg. Even a fragment of it could have been a family heirloom. It was beyond my ability to even guess how much this was worth.

“Incredible,” I whispered, forgetting all my shock from mere minutes ago as I took in the necklace.

Beside me, Lord Simeon said, “This is...”

“Lord Simeon?”

When I looked up, I was met with a very grave expression. Creases had formed on his brow and he glared at the necklace with terrifying eyes.

“Do you know something?”

“It looks exactly like the necklace His Majesty commissioned as a gift to present to the Grand Duke of Lavia and his wife.”

“His...His Majesty?”

My hands began to tremble. It would be awful to drop something of such

importance, so I hurriedly and carefully rested the box in my lap. Looking down at it again, it did indeed appear to be of a high enough standard that the royal family might have ordered it. *Though I doubt even the queen would wear a necklace this spectacular on a regular basis.*

Despite his troubled expression, Lord Simeon spoke matter-of-factly. “The grand duke and duchess are to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary this year. The necklace was ordered to commemorate that —and the jeweler it was ordered from was indeed Bijoux Carpentier.”

Lavia was one of our neighboring countries, and Princess Henriette was due to marry into their royal family. She was engaged to Prince Liberto, who was next in line to be grand duke. This was a gift spectacular enough to honor such a relationship between our two nations. No doubt it was also meant as a show of might to our rival great power, Easdale.

Why would such a precious necklace be here in my hands?

“Could it have been stolen from the jewelry store?” I asked.

“No, the necklace was already delivered. It’s been under strict guard at the palace.”

“So it was taken from the palace?”

“It can’t have been. Even the most talented of thieves would struggle to get inside the —”

Lord Simeon stopped suddenly —and the topic we’d discussed that same morning reappeared in my mind. The Royal Order of Knights was in a state of unrest right now because an intruder had reached the area surrounding the vault.

Are these two events connected? But I thought nothing was stolen from the vault?

Lord Simeon was no doubt thinking the same thing. “Could I borrow it for a moment?”

He picked up the box and looked at it closely from various angles.

Soon he let out a breath. “It’s most likely an imitation. I don’t believe these

are real jewels.”

“What?” In surprise, I leaned forward to bring myself closer. Lord Simeon handed it back to me and I stared at it. “Looking again now that you’ve said it, the jewels do look more like glass. Still, if I didn’t know, I’d definitely have thought it was real.”

“Yes, it’s impeccably made. I wonder if it might have been produced as a sample. For an item of this quality, it wouldn’t be enough to present the buyer with only a drawing. They would need to see it in completed form at least once to confirm it was to their satisfaction. This is probably a fake made for that purpose.”

“Goodness.” Indeed, when he explained it, it made sense. Still, even this ‘fake’ appeared to have been constructed with genuine platinum and pearls. “The man said something about ‘the item you demanded.’ Could it be that he was under threat in some manner? And then, unable to give them the genuine article, he tried to deceive his tormenter with a fake?”

“Perhaps. In any case, we need to make certain that it is indeed a fake, and that the real one is still safely at the palace. We’ll also need to investigate whether it has any connection to the incident I mentioned this morning.”

“Which means...”

“Returning to the palace.”

“Naturally.” Hearing it stated outright, I slumped forward. Yes, it couldn’t have meant anything else. I understood, of course, I really did, but...this was our long-awaited day out together! It was supposed to be one last happy memory of our engagement. Why did it have to turn out like this? Our new glasses and our wedding rings had been stolen, and now the whole day was ruined, to say the least. *Is it my fault for having that dream earlier? Was it a nightmare after all?*

“Please forgive me,” said Lord Simeon. “I realize it brings our day out to an unceremonious end.”

I replied, “There’s no helping it. We can’t expect to enjoy a pleasant afternoon after an event like this regardless. We’ll also need to decide what to

do about the rings.”

I’m sure I can look forward to the lecture of a lifetime from my mother. I also dreaded much the same from my soon-to-be mother-in-law. Countess Estelle would probably abandon all hope for me before I even married her son.

Remembering my own part in this, my mood sank even further. “I’m so sorry. If only I hadn’t kept them with me.”

“You didn’t lose them due to negligence . They were taken from you. There’s no need for you to feel responsible for that. I shouldn’t have left you on your own, in any case.”

“You needn’t feel guilty for that either, Lord Simeon.”

Of course he’d expect me to be all right by myself for a few minutes. I was always walking around the city on my own. Besides, we were inside a department store. Even though many of the patrons were commoners, they were all relatively wealthy. The store itself had the most to fear when it came to thievery, so anyone whose appearance was not up to scratch was turned away at the entrance. Apparently pickpockets who dressed up sufficiently did manage to get inside, but mugging and purse snatching still seemed beyond the realm of reasonable expectations.

I closed the box and wrapped it up in the newspaper again. Lord Simeon took my hand and we stood.

I became conscious that the people sitting nearby were looking at us with highly suspicious expressions. It was uncomfortable to think they might believe we had stolen the necklace, or gained it through some illicit trade. Clutching the package to my chest to hide it, I hurried out of the cafe with Lord Simeon.

In the atrium, we were met by the store’s proprietor, Mr. Aulard, who bowed his head in a thoroughly mortified manner. He was all but prostrating himself before us.

“I cannot apologize enough that such a ghastly incident could take place under my roof. We’ve put every effort into security to ensure a comfortable shopping experience for all our guests, but evidently it wasn’t enough. I regret this more deeply than words can express, and I will warn every one of my

employees that they must exercise a far greater degree of vigilance. If there is any way that I might be able to beg your forgiveness...”

This man, who was more of a gentleman than a large proportion of his customers and no doubt spent his days ordering his staff about like a king, was a sorry sight as he apologized intently for what had happened. After all, a theft had occurred inside his shop, and the victim was the young master of a renowned earldom (or rather, the young master’s companion) and was a highly valued regular customer of the store (so he hoped, at least), so he no doubt felt a corresponding level of pain and frustration that this had happened.

People began to congregate around us, their attention inevitably focused on us as they wondered what had caused the proprietor himself to apologize personally. No matter how polite he was being, it was ultimately rather awkward.

“And the culprit who ran off —he hasn’t been found?” asked Lord Simeon. He didn’t speak in an especially angry tone, instead retaining the same level voice as always, but Mr. Aulard jumped in fright. *Was it such a terrifying question? I suppose Lord Simeon does have that pointed look in his eyes. Perhaps the calmness in his voice came across as menacing.* I couldn’t expect a man to feel the same thrill as I did —in most cases, at least.

“I’m afraid not,” he stammered. “We sent out a search party at once, but it was no use. I am truly, deeply sorry.”

“That’s quite all right. However, there is a chance he’ll take the valuables and throw away the bag. If you find it, I’d like you to get in touch.”

“You have my word,” said Mr. Aulard, his voice still so timid I could hardly bear it.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted, “but please, don’t worry about it too much. Security is important, of course, but I have a feeling this was no ordinary mugging. Allow me to apologize as well for making a mess of your display.”

“You needn’t mention it at all, Miss. I’m merely happy that you’re unhurt.”

‘Unhurt’ wasn’t strictly accurate. One of my legs still hurt —I had hit it in exactly the same spot earlier that morning, so I was sure a magnificent bruise

was forming under my skirt. Thankfully it was an area no one could see, but it still felt rather miserable to have a bruise like that forming right before my wedding.

“Even if we can’t recover the valuables,” I said, “there are some other items inside. Apologies for the inconvenience, but if you could look for the bag it would be a great help.”

“Yes, I’ll have the surrounding area searched. I’ll assign additional staff and do everything we can to try and find it.”

“Thank you. I leave it in your capable hands.”

Inside the handbag was my notebook, which I had filled with mountains of reference material for my novels —not to mention secrets from high society. I had used pseudonyms instead of real names, careful to ensure that no one would immediately know who I was referring to even in the unlikely event that someone else saw my scribbles, but even so, for it to have gone missing left me uneasy. At the very least, I wanted to get the notebook back. Honestly speaking, I really wanted to get the rings and glasses back as well.

As we left, I silently prayed to the heavens that the bag would be safely discovered. The type of people walking around this district were unlikely to simply pick up an abandoned bag and gleefully keep it or sell it, but one never did know.

Our carriage waited in the parking area nearby. Joseph, who still had no idea what had happened, said with a smile, “I didn’t expect you back so soon. Did you enjoy yourselves?”

How to even answer that question? We evaded it with a few vague turns of phrase, and I borrowed Lord Simeon’s arm ready to climb into the carriage.

Just then, a loud cry came from behind. “Wait, please! You there, young lady with the glasses!”

This had to refer to me. Lord Simeon and I looked at one another for a moment, then turned our heads. A lone man was running toward us looking incredibly frantic.

When I saw what was in his hands, I couldn’t help shouting, “My handbag!”

Had someone found it already? Surprised, I lowered my feet from the step and turned around. The man was gasping for breath as he came to a stop before us. His hands rested on his knees and his head faced the ground. He didn't appear to be an employee of Quatre Saisons. His well-tailored outfit painted him as a gentleman. However, after running so flat out, his clothes were in terrible disarray. His chestnut-colored hair, which appeared to have been styled with some sort of hair product, was also a complete mess.

My first thought was that someone who had seen the commotion had happened upon the bag and chased after us. I felt a swelling of emotion along with the urge to immediately confirm the contents. *Is my notebook safe? What about the glasses, and the rings?*

The man raised his head. The instant I saw his face, which was of an age somewhere between youth and midlife, I cried out again. "You!"

It was the very man who had run off with my bag in the first place!

Chapter Four

“It’s you! The one who took it!”

The man before me was, without a doubt, that very same man. I wouldn’t forget him after such a short period of time.

With his disheveled hair hanging over his sweat-drenched forehead, he said between gasps, “The necklace. Please, give me back the necklace.”

Excuse me? You steal someone’s possessions and that’s the first thing you have to say?

I became somewhat indignant, of course. I said firmly, “How about you give me back my handbag?”

He hurriedly held it out in front of him. “Y-yes, of course. Here it is. Take it. I’m sorry for the mix-up.”

I reached out to accept it. Facing him now at close distance, I felt sure that I had seen this man before somewhere. *Who is he? I’m fairly sure he’s not a nobleman, but beyond that...*

At that point, Lord Simeon cut in. Without hesitation, he ignored the bag and grabbed the man by his collar before immediately lifting him up with incredible strength and throwing him inside the carriage. The carriage shook so hard that the horse let out a *neigh* of surprise. Joseph, who was also rather surprised, tried to calm down the horse.

I, meanwhile, amid my alarm at the sudden turn to violence, rushed to pick up the handbag, which had fallen to the floor. “Lord Simeon!?”

Lord Simeon wasted no time bearing down on the man, who had fallen face up. He grabbed him tightly by the collar.

The man gasped and groaned. “What? Stop... Ugh... That hurts...”

“So you’re the culprit?” uttered Lord Simeon in a deep voice. There was no fury in his tone, but his voice was so menacingly cold, it was as though the man

was being stabbed with blades of ice. From Lord Simeon's broad back, and the side of his face, wafted murderous intent.

There he is! The Demon Vice Captain! The sense of menace that some say is akin to a trained assassin has been put into action! Wait, this is hardly the time to be fangirling.

"Lord Simeon," I stammered, rushing over, "there's no need to turn violent all of a sudden. Let him go. You're hurting him."

"This is the culprit, is it not?"

"Well, yes, but that's an awfully strong word when it was clearly a misunderstanding. He must have had some sort of reason. Why don't we listen to his story?"

"His story can wait. First, this gentleman needs to pay for the state of distress he left you in." He declared this coldly, without even turning his head to look at me. While one hand gripped the man's collar, he balled the other into a fist.

Aha, I see. He's angry that this person made me cry. His face was far from a picture of anger —looking at him, you'd never guess he wasn't calm and composed —but in fact, he was enraged. This had occurred before. If a woman had done it he'd still have been angry at her, but when the perpetrator was a man, all mercy disappeared. *Even though he's made me cry himself on occasion...*

I was glad that he cared so much about me, but that didn't mean I could watch an act of violence and feel joyful about it. I did my utmost to try and stop him. "No, you mustn't! This man is an ordinary civilian. His fine clothes make him look fancier, but underneath he appears to be rather thin. Scrawny, even. If you punch him with one of your trained fists, you'll break him to pieces and send him shuffling off this mortal coil in one hit. 'Beaten to death' is an awful phrase, and I'm quite sure it would look just as awful. It would be far more elegant for you to stab him in the chest with a blade."

Beneath Lord Simeon, the man let out a shriek.

"See, he's terrified. Why don't you punish him a little more gently? There are all sorts of ways. Restraining him and using candle wax, for example. And

there's your riding crop, of course. I'll research and find other ideas!"

"There is *definitely* no need for you to research that," he said, his energy drained. My urgent appeal was effective; the murderous intent had left him. He pulled his hands off the man and looked at me over his shoulder with a conflicted expression. "How do you know so many things that are so very unnecessary for you to know?"

"Unnecessary? Whatever do you mean? Oh, but of course, you're the interrogation expert, Lord Simeon. You must know all sorts of ways to punish your victim. Not hurting them in a visible and gratuitous way, but tormenting them slowly, driving them mad, stoking deep fear inside their hearts. Would you mind letting me watch you one day? It would make for excellent reference material."

"I do not know any such means of punishment!" He paused a moment. "Well, that's not *entirely* accurate, but..."

"Aha, I knew it! Nothing less from my brutal black-hearted military officer!"

"Noooooooo!" came a shriek from under Lord Simeon. For a grown man, he seemed unexpectedly terrified. "I'm so sorry, it was all just a misunderstanding! Forgive me, I beg you!"

His face had turned pale and tears welled in his eyes. Lord Simeon's anger had been conveyed to him more than adequately without any need to strike him. Surely this was punishment enough, I thought.

The man who had involved me in this case of mistaken identity introduced himself as Claude Carpentier. Upon hearing his name, I finally remembered. *I knew I'd seen him somewhere before!* Yes, he worked at Bijoux Carpentier. He was the proprietor's son, whom I had seen at the shop many times. I was so used to seeing him with a perfectly composed expression that I hadn't recognized his extraordinarily ferocious visage earlier.

Passersby were staring at us once again due to the commotion we were causing, so we decided to talk inside the carriage. Claude sat across from us, shrinking back in fear.

"My behavior toward you was unpardonably rude. I hadn't realized you were

the companion of Lord Flaubert. I am deeply sorry. You're Viscount Clarac's daughter, are you not?"

He asked this with a slight lack of confidence in his voice. It seemed Claude had also not known who I was, and had only realized when he saw Lord Simeon by my side. That was an everyday occurrence for me, of course, so I saw no reason to be bothered by it. I am noted for being so unmemorable that people forget what I look like even after meeting me several times. I have so little presence and leave such a faint impression that people can pass by me without even noticing me.

I said as much in an effort to assuage Claude's conscience, and Lord Simeon replied, "It's only because you hide your presence on purpose to avoid standing out. No one who knows your real character would ever describe you in such terms."

"Still, it's not as though I spend my entire life hiding my presence. Perhaps I started doing it by accident in the cafe. In any case, why did you take my bag, Claude?"

Before discussing anything, we had already checked my handbag and ensured that everything was still safely inside. The glasses and rings were there, as were my notebook and the cards Lord Simeon had bought for me. All the tension had left me, but in its place had arisen an intense curiosity as to what was going on.

"Yes, well," he stammered, "allow me to apologize again. It was entirely my mistake. You were holding a ring box with our logo on it, so I assumed you were the person I was supposed to trade with."

He wiped away his sweat and used his fingers to comb his hair back into a semblance of order. With his appearance now somewhat more presentable, he regained the aura of one who worked for a long-standing specialty store. However, his face remained every bit as gaunt.

Pointing to the necklace box in my hands, Lord Simeon asked, "And you were supposed to trade this with someone?"

Claude nodded several times in quick succession and looked at the box with a longing gaze that said he wished us to return it straight away. I looked up at Lord Simeon, who shook his head, and kept the package firmly in my grasp.

Claude appeared to be very anxious indeed.

Lord Simeon continued, “What sort of trade were you doing, and with whom? Depending on your reply, I may be taking you straight to the police.”

“P-p-please don’t! Or rather, if there’s any way we can deal with this quietly, then, please... If it becomes a police matter, the reputation of Bijoux Carpentier will be dragged through the mud. Please, I beg your mercy.”

“This necklace is a fake, is it not? To whom exactly did you intend to give a perfect copy of an item ordered by the royal family? What were you scheming?”

Lord Simeon spoke in a strict voice, mercilessly pressing Claude for answers even as the latter begged for forgiveness in a manner that made me feel sorry for him. Behind Lord Simeon’s coldly glinting spectacles, his sharp gaze stabbed into Claude. His light blue eyes became blades of ice pointed at his prey. There was no escape from the Grim Reaper as he came to harvest your soul.

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon, glancing at me—and my notebook.

“Oh, no, please go on. I’m listening.” I hurriedly scribbled down the various phrases that had just popped into my mind. *It’s his fault for being so dashing. I must immediately record the fruits of my fangirling so I can channel it into my work.*

As though he had decided to consciously ignore this, Lord Simeon returned his attention to Claude. “What you’ve told me already provides more than adequate grounds to arrest you. If you do not wish for the charges to be even graver, I’d suggest you confess the details in full.”

“B-b-but, I...”

“If you won’t say it here, then you’ll say it to the police. In fact, no, this is a matter for the Royal Order of Knights. I’ll bring you to the palace and question you properly in the interrogation room.”

He squealed shrilly and cowered in his seat. This prospect was even more terrifying than the police.

“You, you must understand, I was not planning any misdeeds! None

whatsoever! I'm a victim as well! A ring was stolen from us!"

"A ring?" asked Lord Simeon. "Not the necklace?"

"Yes, a ring—one we made to order specifically for a client. It was stolen just as we were about to give it to them. The criminal sent us a threatening letter, demanding that if we wanted the ring back, we needed to hand over the sample version of the necklace ordered by the royal family."

"The sample version? They requested that specifically?"

"Yes," said Claude.

I suddenly stopped moving my pen and looked at Lord Simeon. "Isn't that rather odd?" The perpetrator hadn't wanted real jewels, but glass imitations? If the ring was a special order then it was likely to have been far more valuable, so why would they have used the real ring as bait to get a fake necklace?

"Just as I suspected, this is under our jurisdiction," Lord Simeon replied. "It cannot possibly be a normal theft. I'm concerned about how it might be connected to the other incident we discussed."

"Yes," I said, "the stench of intrigue is everywhere. But still, why not steal the fake necklace in the first place? It was in the same shop, was it not?" I picked up the necklace box in my lap.

But Claude shook his head feebly. "It wasn't an item that was for sale, or one we would put on display, so it was stored in the safe at our own home. The ring, however, was stored in the safe at the shop. Shamefully enough, the person who stole it was one of our own employees."

"So it was an inside job?" I asked.

"He'd been working for us for an awfully long time, so we trusted him a great deal. This betrayal came as quite a shock. Although, the handwriting in the letter differed from his, so we're wondering if he might have had a co-conspirator, or if there's another ringleader behind it all."

Lord Simeon asked, "Are you absolutely sure that this employee is the one who carried out the theft?"

"Y-yes," Claude replied with a start, still trembling. It seemed the pressure

Lord Simeon had applied earlier had been thoroughly effective—and he continued to exude more and more menace. “The night before the ring disappeared, he performed the final inspection, and then...the next day, he didn’t turn up for work. I visited his home, but he and his wife had disappeared. A few days earlier they had apparently been sighted racing off somewhere in a hurry, but we’ve seen him since then, and in any case, no one knows where they are now. How could we not believe it was him?”

“I see.” Lord Simeon folded his arms and appeared to be deep in thought.

I cocked my head as well. Indeed, this employee was the most suspicious party. Still, would a humble jewelry store worker really involve himself in a plot related to the royal family? “Could he have been bribed by the ringleader? Or blackmailed in some manner?”

“Indeed, either is possible,” said Lord Simeon. “Was the ring the only thing stolen?”

“Yes. The safe had cash and various other items in it, but nothing else was touched. We searched the entire shop, but that was the only thing missing.”

I said, “So the goal was the ring alone...and consequently the fake necklace?”

It seemed inconceivable that all this wasn’t connected to the incident at the palace. The details were too similar. Normally, such a hint of a thorny case would have made me thrilled at the chance to collect reference material of unparalleled quality, but with my wedding only two days away, I felt somewhat less enthused. I was hesitant to get too deeply embroiled. To put it bluntly, we didn’t have time for this.

“And it was the perpetrator, or perpetrators, who directed you to the cafe?” asked Lord Simeon.

“Yes,” Claude replied.

“In which case, they must have been close by.”

When Lord Simeon pointed this out, I realized he was right. Whoever Claude was meant to have traded with must have observed the exchange between the two of us. They must have been very close. A shiver ran down my spine. “Could they still be somewhere nearby? Watching us?”

Suddenly scared, I cast my eyes outside. We'd closed the door to guard against prying eyes, but it was too hot and stuffy to avoid opening the windows. If someone was determined, they could have been spying on what was happening inside the carriage.

Putting an arm around my shoulders, Lord Simeon said gently, "I wouldn't worry. They can't engage in any reckless behavior with so many people around. Furthermore, if they did take action, it would be to our advantage. I would arrest them on the spot."

His confident words brought me a great deal of reassurance. *That's right, Lord Simeon is here. The evildoers are the ones who need to be afraid.* I nodded as if to reassure myself that it would indeed be all right. "It must be quite inconvenient for them as well, their plans having been upset like this. I suppose they'll try to get in touch again?"

"That is a possibility. Only, if we presume that they saw us making contact with Claude, I'm not sure they wouldn't give up. If they know who I am, it might make them especially vigilant. They might try to draw as little attention to themselves as possible."

It was true. If their opponent was, of all people, the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, they would probably lose their nerve. It would not be merely the police going after them, but the military. If we headed to the palace now, it seemed entirely possible that they would give up on the trade and all contact would cease.

"Lord Simeon, why don't we make them lower their guard? If we don't go to the palace now, but to the jewelry store, they'll conclude that we're not involving the police or the military yet."

He considered in silence.

"This is definitely not the real necklace—Claude has confirmed as much," I continued. "This means there's no need to confirm that the real one is still at the palace, correct? If so, then the first priority is recovering the ring."

"But it's still a matter that I should report to Captain Poisson, and to His Majesty the King."

“Of course. But if you go straight to the palace now, they will most certainly escape with the ring.”

Rushing straight to the palace now, thus alerting whoever had stolen the ring, was completely unnecessary. It would be better to simply contact the palace later, more surreptitiously.

As I insisted upon this, Lord Simeon looked rather displeased. “From my point of view, I must say that the identity of those responsible is more important than the stolen ring.”

“But you won’t find them unless you lure them out, will you?”

“Additionally, we cannot take this gentleman’s words at face value,” said Lord Simeon with a sharp glance at Claude.

“I-I-I’m not lying!” he pleaded in a shrieking tone. “I have not said a single word that was untrue!”

“Even if I do trust your words, you must have realized as soon as the threatening letter arrived that this was a matter related to the royal family, yes? And yet, you ignored this and informed neither the police nor the palace, instead doing exactly as the letter demanded. A modicum of thought should have told you where this scheme was likely to lead. They wouldn’t have been satisfied with just the sample necklace—obviously they intended to use it with a further goal in mind. And you supported that scheme, behaving entirely in accordance with it, despite the potentially calamitous consequences for the royal family. That alone amounts to treason.”

In response to Lord Simeon’s harsh and cold voice, Claude fervently shook his head. “Treason!? No! I didn’t intend anything of the sort! Admittedly, I-I-I understand that it’s worthy of a harsh rebuke. We should really have reported it straight away. But if we had, all of us—including me, and all of the staff—would have lost our jobs and been left destitute. In our trade, trust is paramount. For a theft to have been committed by one of our own... If such a thing became widely known, we’d lose all of our customers.”

Lord Simeon was a person who put duty first, but for Claude, business came first. They both bore a similar sense of responsibility, but the perspectives from which they came at one another were entirely opposed. They each glared at

one another, fiercely guarding the ground they were unable to give.

“But the deplorable event really did take place,” said Lord Simeon, “so how can you expect to avoid the consequences of it? Concealing it is purely for your own self-preservation, is it not?”

“It’s a necessity! If we don’t conceal it, our livelihood will be ruined! Apologies for putting it so bluntly, but it’s unlike the various scandals that occur in the military or in government offices. We would lose everything in an instant!”

As you’d expect of the heir to a long-established shop, Claude had more in him than simply fear. On the contrary, he was able to flare up in return. Just as he said, when scandals occurred in public institutions, it didn’t devastate the organization. The person concerned was dealt with, but the organization itself survived intact. This no doubt seemed terribly unfair to civilian workers for whom a single scandal could be ruinous.

In that sense, I could understand his desire to rebut Lord Simeon’s words. Still, this was not the right way to do it—this manner of speaking would only anger Lord Simeon.

I hastily interrupted, “We understand you’re in a tough spot. Still, Bijoux Carpentier is the victim, is it not? Even if it was a theft committed by one of your own, you are still the injured party. I suspect plenty of people will sympathize with you as well.”

I forcibly changed the direction of the conversation to emphasize Claude’s status as a poor victim, doing my best to keep Lord Simeon at bay.

Claude replied, “If a bad reputation was all I feared, then perhaps it could be repaired...but if we don’t get that ring back, it will all be for nothing. The losses we incur will be too great to bear.”

“Is the ring truly that valuable?”

Having regained some of his composure, Claude sighed and nodded. “It is indeed. We received an advance payment of one million algiers, then began searching for the stones. The cost of procuring exactly the right ones came to around two million algiers—in excess of two and a half million with expenses included. The client had agreed to purchase it for three million.”

“Th...three million...”

This was an unimaginably high price for a ring. It was a price for which one could buy a small castle. Someone able to spend such a preposterous sum of money would have to be *incredibly* wealthy. A multimillionaire. It was so different from the world I lived in that I could hardly comprehend it.

Claude continued, “We’d not only have to return the advance payment, but pay a fine for breach of contract as well. If we don’t recover the ring, our losses will be close to three million algiers. In addition to that, we will lose customers. We definitely won’t be able to continue afterwards. We will be forced to close the shop.”

Claude’s fists were shaking in his lap. I groaned. *I see, so he’s in rather a precarious position.* It was only natural that Claude and his father had felt their backs were against the wall.

“Perhaps it’s not appropriate to ask, but...who was the client that ordered the ring?”

I decided it was worth trying to ask. To a certain degree I wished to know out of pure curiosity. Who was it that could casually afford to spend three million algiers on a ring? However, even aside from that, it was information we needed to know.

Claude considered for a moment and appeared to reach the same conclusion. “I must ask you to keep this between us, but...it’s for Duke Silvestre.”

“What!?” I exclaimed involuntarily. “Him?”

I had been nodding along in understanding, but in an instant I took a turn into sheer disbelief. *What did he just say? I must have misheard, surely? Some sort of auditory hallucination?* With all my might, I tried to will myself into having not heard him say that name.

But, as if to disallow that, Claude repeated it. “Yes, it was Duke Silvestre, His Majesty’s cousin. The duke ordered a diamond ring.”

I slowly turned my head and then looked at Lord Simeon in silence. He looked back at me as well. For a moment, the two of us sat frozen wordlessly in place.

Duke Silvestre. A name I was not expecting to hear today.

It was a name I'd have gladly never heard again. For us, it was nothing but ominous. It was a name I'd have liked to discard into the most distant recesses of my memory, in the hope of having nothing to do with it for the rest of my life.

Of course, I fully accepted that this was impossible. And, even if it were, not enough time had passed for me to forget. It was only recently that Duke Silvestre had upended our lives. The unimaginable incident that began with Lord Simeon being arrested on false charges had been masterminded by the duke all along. And it had all been with the ulterior motive of purging the corruption in the military. The navy, the army, and the royal guard—given how many men they employed between them, it was impossible for them to stamp out corruption entirely. Just as Claude had hinted, these sorts of problems occurred over and over again. And the duke had planned all this to enable a purge of many problematic individuals.

For him, the turmoil of Lord Simeon being falsely accused was simply a means to an end. Admittedly, it had been only me that fretted too greatly about it. In contrast, Lord Simeon, Captain Poisson, and Prince Severin had turned the situation to their advantage and used it to lay a trap. But that, too, had all been foreseen by the duke. Up to the very end, it had all gone according to his machinations.

It would be one thing if he had done it out of a sense of justice, or fealty toward the kingdom, but in the duke's case, his motivation was purely his own amusement. Purging the military branches of corruption was no more than a game to him—a way of staving off boredom. Wrapping Lord Simeon up in it was also no more and no less than a mean-spirited prank. All in all, it made me dearly wish to have nothing further to do with him.

And yet I'm hearing his name again so soon.

I felt an incredible sense of foreboding. Don't judge me for it, but a small part of me, a tiny part, wished to simply throw Claude to the wolves and be done with it.

After some further discussion, we decided to head not to Bijoux Carpentier,

but to Claude's own home. Once Duke Silvestre had been mentioned, even Lord Simeon agreed, despite his prior disapproval, to change his approach. He agreed with Claude's wish, and mine, to get the ring back while keeping the matter as private as possible.

It seemed that Lord Simeon, too, wished to avoid a scenario where the duke learned of the theft. We had no connection to it—we were mere bystanders who had become caught up in the case by accident—but Duke Silvestre would never accept such an excuse. He seemed to have a strange interest in us at the best of times, and, given a catalyst like this, we would no doubt be the victims of his harassment once more.

I realize I've mentioned this repeatedly, but our wedding ceremony was just two days away. Not even that—closer to a day and a half at this point. I had absolutely no desire to spend that time playing "games" with Duke Silvestre. Lord Simeon and I were entirely unified in our desire to avoid giving the duke any excuse whatsoever to start digging his claws into us again.

Lord Simeon still had to report to the palace, but he agreed to do it later, in secret, as I had suggested. First we needed to speak to Claude's father, the proprietor of Bijoux Carpentier, and agree on a strategy, so we decided our next destination would be their home.

This meant traveling to an upscale residential neighborhood on the opposite shore of the Latour from the district where shops such as Quatre Saisons and Bijoux Carpentier were located. The atmosphere changed after crossing the Philippe Bridge. There were fewer carriages and pedestrians passing by, and fewer shops as well. This was a quiet residential area, just as the wealthy preferred.

The driver proceeded according to Claude's directions, while inside the carriage we all fell silent. Lord Simeon gazed through the window, while next to him I thought idly about how hungry I was. We had long since passed lunch time. Ordinarily we would have found somewhere to have a relaxed bite to eat, but in all the commotion we had skipped lunch entirely. *I wonder if we'll be served anything at Claude's house?* I was quite worried that my stomach might rumble. I didn't want to make any improper noises in front of Lord Simeon.

I made a miserable sigh—and at that same moment, the carriage stopped abruptly.

We definitely hadn't reached our destination yet. Lord Simeon appeared rather puzzled as well, and poked his head through the window. "Joseph, what's wrong?"

"My apologies. There's a carriage in front of us that appears to have lost a wheel."

Hearing Joseph's answer, I looked up, praying to the heavens. *Why do we keep running into problems wherever we go? Am I cursed by that bad dream? Or is Duke Silvestre still tormenting us?*

I yearned for the pudding from the cafe at Quatre Saisons. I hadn't even been able to eat that. *Why couldn't Claude have come after I'd eaten it?*

But when someone was in need, not helping them was unthinkable. We couldn't have simply continued on our way and pretended we didn't see it. One of Sans-Terre's points of pride is that its denizens are jovial and full of empathy. We help other people, even if they're people we don't know.

Joseph asked if he could go and lend a hand, and Lord Simeon gave permission without any reluctance. Shortly thereafter, Lord Simeon also moved to exit the carriage, but before he could, a knock came at the door, followed by a man's voice. "Excuse me, terribly sorry for the trouble, but could I ask for your assistance?"

It seemed Joseph alone was not enough. Naturally, Lord Simeon opened the door straight away.

The instant he leaned out...

"Don't move!"

The voice took on an entirely different, deeper tone. I peered forward to find out what was going on and saw that a blade had been thrust toward Lord Simeon's throat.

"Lord Simeon!"

"Get back," Lord Simeon said calmly, holding me back with an arm. He was

told to get out and descended from the carriage.

What? How can this be...

Another man appeared and spoke to Claude. "You too! Out!"

Claude, whose eyes had gone completely blank at this unexpected turn of events, jumped when he was addressed directly. "Wh...what? Me too?"

"Get out, right now!" The impatient ruffian reached out and grabbed Claude, then pulled at him. With a shriek, he tumbled out of the carriage.

I drew myself further back inside, wondering if I would also be made to leave. The ruffians looked in my direction for a second, but did not address me.

I understood the reason immediately. Their target was Claude.

"You! Where's the necklace? Hand it over."

"What?" gasped Claude.

I surreptitiously edged closer to the door again so I could take in the situation outside. While two of the men held Joseph and Lord Simeon in place, yet another stood before Claude. *How many of them are there? And for ruffians, they're awfully well dressed.* They ranged from young to middle-aged.

"The necklace!" said the man standing in front of Claude. "You got it back off them, didn't you?"

His hands still on the ground, Claude cried in surprise, "Armand!? What are you...?"

The man was around Claude's age, with short hair that was a dark shade of brown. He was clean shaven and his cravat was tied tightly. His outer appearance definitely did not look like that of a highwayman.

Yes, I thought, *this all fits*. They were not highwaymen, but the ones Claude was supposed to trade with. They were dressed so finely because they had been planning to meet Claude in the cafe and trade the ring for the necklace. *Now that I think about it, weren't there some rather interested-looking customers sitting nearby?* I had a faint recollection that it might have been these very same men sitting nearby in the cafe. No wonder they had been so focused on me.

Just as Lord Simeon had said, they had been watching me and Claude from close by. Because of Claude's misunderstanding they had missed their chance to get the necklace, so they had evidently changed their plan in a hurry, opting for this surprise attack.

I had expected them to make contact again, but this was sooner than I had imagined, and in far more violent a manner. I looked over at Lord Simeon. The knife was still pointed at his neck, but his face was calm. He was focused less on the man threatening him and more on the one speaking to Claude.

Claude looked up. "Armand, why are you behaving this way? What on earth have you gotten yourself involved with!? You were always such a hard worker. Why!?"

It seemed that this Armand was the employee who had stolen the ring from the shop. From the looks of things, he wasn't merely being used by the criminals, but was a fully fledged co-conspirator. *In which case, this is a valid question indeed. Why has a jewelry store employee become involved with a theft that has a whiff of being part of a larger conspiracy?*

In stark contrast to Claude's sorrowful gaze, Armand laughed mirthfully.

"It's better not to ask. You should just stay quiet and hand over the necklace. Do that and you'll be able to return home safely. We'll give you back the diamond ring." Armand took a small box out of his pocket. Seeing that, Claude made to stand up, but Armand quickly stopped him. "Oho, don't make any sudden movements. First, the necklace...which you don't appear to have on your person. Is it inside the carriage?"

Armand turned to look at me, as did the other men.

This was a moment of distraction that Lord Simeon would never overlook, of course. Immediately he lowered his body away from the knife and delivered a sweep that knocked the man holding him off his feet. The man toppled to the floor, hitting his head violently, then lay there moaning.

The other ruffians instantly grew enraged.

"Why, you!" growled one.

"I told you not to let your guard down!" shouted Armand. "Don't you realize

he's...!"

The men leapt into action to try and subdue Lord Simeon. He nimbly dodged their blows and threw a punch at the one restraining Joseph. The man narrowly dodged it and tried to move further away, but Lord Simeon swung his arm back and struck him with an elbow. In a flash, there was a second man laid out on the floor. Lord Simeon wasted no time in striking a third with a powerful kick.



“Ugh, I should have expected no less.” Armand turned away from the brawl, and from Claude, and ran toward me instead. His goal was clear. I hurriedly scooped up the necklace box. *I cannot let him take this.* But all thoughts of hiding it seemed futile, because there was nowhere in the carriage to put it. The only things there were Lord Simeon’s bag, another large package, and my handbag. I knew if I put it in one of the bags it would soon be discovered. *And what is that other package, anyway? Did Lord Simeon buy something at the department store?*

Lord Simeon, too, noticed that Armand was coming for me and ran over to the carriage. As Armand went to climb inside, Lord Simeon grabbed him and tried to drag him back. Armand immediately rebuffed him with an elbow and shook him off—but Lord Simeon wasn’t defeated, of course. He dodged the elbow and kept coming after him. It became a battle between them, attack and defense.

I didn’t know much about Armand, but I could tell he was no mere shop assistant. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. He was actually a match for Lord Simeon, not only avoiding his blows but fighting back. Even with my untrained eye I could tell that his movements were practiced ones. He even seemed able to deliver unusual attacks that were more lithe and flexible than those of the military.

Lord Simeon, not to be trifled with, fought on with magnificent strikes of his own. And yet, he just couldn’t take Armand down. The latter was too agile, and skillfully avoided everything Lord Simeon threw at him. *It was rare for any opponent to give him so much trouble. It doesn’t bear thinking about, but...he will be all right, won’t he?*

I didn’t know the first thing about martial arts, but my perception was that if they kept going at each other like this, Lord Simeon would win in the end. As evenly matched as they seemed at present, Lord Simeon was exerting himself far less than Armand. Though Armand fought on with his unusual moves, he did so in a way that suggested he was putting in every ounce of his effort, which inevitably led to him losing ground.

So if it was a one-on-one battle, there would have been no problem. But

Armand had his co-conspirators.

“Joseph, take the carriage and go!”

Swinging into action at Lord Simeon’s command, Joseph came running back. But a punch from the side sent him flying. The man who had punched Joseph climbed into the driver’s seat instead, and another climbed up next to him.

Before I had time to take in what was happening, the carriage shook wildly, the horse let out a loud *neigh*, and I, who was half leaning over, flew backwards into the seat.

“Marielle!” cried Lord Simeon. I raised my head to look at him. He tried to come closer, but Armand stopped him, and another man assaulted him from behind. Lord Simeon was forced into a fight, and Armand left him behind and ran after the carriage that was starting to set off. For a few moments he ran alongside it, then he nimbly jumped through the still-open door.

“My word, I had so hoped to avoid fighting him,” he said in a casual tone as he closed the door.

I backed up, sticking close to the window on the far side. The carriage rapidly picked up speed in an effort to leave Lord Simeon and Joseph in the dust. I poked my head through the window and looked back. Lord Simeon was trying to untie the horse from the ruffians’ abandoned carriage, but the remaining men interfered. In the time it took him to fend them off, the gap between us widened, and Lord Simeon disappeared farther and farther into the distance.

“After that sort of fight, I have no choice but to abandon the plan. Running away is all there is for it.”

Armand sat down right next to me. When I pulled my head back through the window and turned to look, I was struck by his impudent smile.

“Now, where might the necklace be?”

With an easygoing expression, Armand began to search the inside of the carriage. He opened Lord Simeon’s bag, then closed it after a cursory glance inside. He also picked up the large package that looked like an item Lord Simeon had bought, shook it for a moment, then quickly abandoned it.

Then his blue eyes turned toward my dress. "So that's where it is."

So he realized after all. In the end, there had been nowhere else in the carriage to hide it.

"Will you take it out yourself, young lady? Or will you make me rummage around under your skirt? I'd welcome the opportunity, I must say."

His taunting made my cheeks grow hot. *Don't even joke about that! It's something I haven't even allowed of Lord Simeon!*

I did as he asked and reached under my skirt, grasping the handbag inside carefully to prevent Armand from seeing my legs.

But I had no intention of handing it over. *Don't underestimate me! Don't think I'm a powerless woman who will do whatever you ask!*

I pulled out the handbag, then leapt up next to the window. The bag was still open, with the necklace box jutting out where I had hurriedly stuffed it inside, but there was no helping that. I held the bag aloft.

I knew that what he wanted more than anything was the necklace, so there was only one thing to do before he took it from me. If I threw it out of the carriage, Lord Simeon would surely retrieve it.

I put all my strength into my arms, ready to throw it as far as possible, but Armand grabbed me. "Stop!"

"No! Let me go!"

We shoved and pushed one another in the moving carriage. When Armand tried to take the handbag, I jerked back the other way and banged my leg hard against the wall.

"Ow!" I shrieked reflexively. I had hit the same bruised spot yet again. This was the third time now. I felt ready to cry from the pain.

For reasons unknown, Armand looked flustered for a moment. He gasped, and the strength went out of his arms. *Is he a gentleman after all?* But I had no time to start praising him. Now was my chance! I shook him off and threw the handbag out of the window.

"No!" cried Armand, reaching out for it, but it slipped through his arms and

flew off.

One box fell out of the open bag: the box containing the wedding rings. This dropped back into the carriage, colliding with my arms and Armand's along the way.

Armand brushed past me and leaned out of the window, then tutted. While he was distracted, I picked up the wedding ring box from the floor.

Sighing, Armand returned to his seat. "You are a pain in the neck, tomboy."

I looked away from him standoffishly. "Man or woman, I am still a noble serving the royal family. I cannot be so negligent as to hand over something that is being used in a plot against them."

"Goodness," he said with a threatening gaze, "and you'd sacrifice your life for that?"

I glared back at him. "I doubt you'd go to the extreme of killing me."

This man was no mere mugger or highwayman. He was working in accordance with some sort of plan. I didn't think he was the type of person to impulsively commit a murder.

He had missed another chance to get the item he needed, and was left instead with a lady he could use as a hostage. Most likely, he would take advantage of that and use me to broker another deal.

This would increase the chances of him making contact with Lord Simeon, which would be to our advantage. One hears that kidnappings with a profit motive are the crime with the lowest success rate. I felt certain that Lord Simeon would finish dealing with those ruffians, then come and save me.

"What's happening in there?" came a voice from outside.

Armand raised his voice too and replied to his comrade in the driver's seat. "We've lost the necklace. This woman threw it out the window."

"What!?" came the reply.

"Stop!" said the other man sitting up front. "We have to go back right away and pick it up!"

“No, keep going,” said Armand, giving a level-headed order to his panicking comrades. “The gentleman we encountered just now is sure to chase after us. If we hang around too long, he’ll catch us.”

“But—”

“We’ve no other choice for now. We must leave it behind. There’s no way to win against that man with physical force alone. We need to withdraw for now and rethink our approach.”

Perhaps his role as a jewelry store employee had been a lie all along. Armand was more than just another co-conspirator, even—he was the one giving the orders. They obeyed him and the carriage continued to race along without stopping.

Incidentally, their exchange was in a foreign language. Although they had all spoken in Lagrangian until that point, amongst themselves they had conversed in Lavian. Did that mean they were from Lavia? But that would mean a group of Lavians was trying to get their hands on a fake version of a gift that was meant for the Grand Duke and Duchess of Lavia. What was going on? It made no sense to me.

Armand’s easygoing expression returned, and he sat calmly beside me. I tried to draw away from him and toward the wall, and pretended I did not understand Lavian. “Your comrades, are they from a foreign land? Those words sounded like Lavian. What were you talking about?”

“This city is full of people from all over the world. Lavia’s a neighboring country, it’s not especially unusual.”

“True, immigrants or tourists from Lavia are a normal sight. But you’re something else. What on earth are you planning?”

Instead of answering my question, Armand laughed with scorn. “They say curiosity killed the cat, young lady. You’d be better off staying silent and cowering in fear. Strong women have charms of their own, but you should recognize the position you’re in.”

He spoke with a hint of danger in his voice. He hadn’t threatened me with violence directly, but he wanted me to feel as though I didn’t know what he

might do if I ruined his good mood.

I bit my lip and fell silent. It was frustrating, but there was nothing I could do but sit quietly as he suggested. If I made a fuss, I'd only have been putting myself in danger when I didn't know what was coming next. Perhaps he was merely trying to intimidate me, but if so, he had done so successfully.

I clutched the box in my hands to my chest. In this situation where there was nothing I could do, I felt as though all I could place my faith in were the rings with Lord Simeon's name engraved on them.

It's all right. He'll definitely rescue me. Lord Simeon would not leave me to my fate. Wherever they take me, he will definitely come and find me there.

And I was hardly the kind of person to simply tremble in fear and let matters take their course. If I was to be held hostage, then I'd use that as an opportunity to find out Armand and his comrades' true identities and goals. *Maybe I can even get back the stolen ring—Duke Silvestre's ring.*

I took a sideways glance and saw a slight bulge in Armand's jacket. That pocket had to be where he was keeping the duke's ring. *I'll bide my time and wait for my chance. I'll make him think I'm a helpless little girl so that he lets his guard down and leaves me an opening.*

I turned to face the window and watched the scenery fly past. The carriage, which had not long before crossed over the Philippe Bridge, had returned to it again already. It crossed back, then continued along the bank of the Latour. We were heading upstream, in the opposite direction from the harbor. I wondered where we were going. At this pace, it wouldn't be long before we reached the outskirts of the city.

The rays of afternoon sun glimmered on the river's surface. A handful of small boats floated in the river, with ladies on their decks elegantly holding parasols. Boating was a typical activity for lovers. I had wanted to enjoy an afternoon of boating with Lord Simeon as well. If there had been time today, I was intending to ask him.

The world I was used to felt painfully far away. My own situation was so at odds with the brightness outside that I felt as though I'd slipped into a nightmare again.

Chapter Five

After we left the city proper and emerged into a suburb, the carriage finally stopped. This far outside the center there were fewer large housing blocks and more detached houses. Armand made me leave the carriage when we had arrived at what appeared to be a holiday home built on the bank of the river.

Surrounding it were woods and ponds that would be perfect for a peaceful stroll. I could also see other nobles' residences not too far away. Flowers bloomed wherever I looked, and tiny birds and squirrels darted about. This was an incredibly tranquil and beautiful place.

It most definitely did not have the aura of a villains' lair. Some way off, there were people walking through the woods. *I wonder if they'd hear me if I cried out?* But I suspected Armand and his comrades would not let me escape so easily. Besides, I had to recover the stolen ring first.

"Walk," said Armand, pushing me. I was frogmarched towards the building like a prisoner, surrounded by him and the two other men.

The front door opened as we approached. A man in his fifties, just as well dressed as the others, showed his face. "What's going on? Who's this woman?"

"Apologies, but we failed," said Armand.

This frank response caused the man's face to immediately screw up with anger.

Another man appeared behind him. "What's happened!?"

"Now now," said Armand. "Let's discuss it inside. If we make a scene, we'll draw unwanted attention."

The man in his fifties flared up. "You were so full of brash confidence when you introduced yourself. You *insisted* we could leave it all to you. How could you let this happen!?"

"I can only apologize again," Armand replied, remaining calm. "We

unfortunately suffered a number of unexpected setbacks.”

“How dare you return here without the very item in question! And what do you intend by bringing this woman here, you nincompoop!?”

It seemed that among this group, this older man was the most important. I had the sense he might be a nobleman. He had an air about him as though he was used to giving orders to others, but perhaps was an inexperienced amateur when it came to many other things. Events so far had already made it clear that this was no ordinary robbery, so it stood to reason that the group assembled to commit it might also include members who would not normally be involved in such a crime.

Though the man continued to stand in the doorway and grumble, Armand made an effort to calm and reassure him. Armand alone seemed different from the others. Perhaps he had joined the group as the only experienced criminal? I longed to know what was going on.

Incidentally, this exchange was also in Lavian. I could also be quite confident from looking at them that they were all from Lavia.

“A royal guard?” demanded the older man once we were sitting inside. “How did you attract the attention of such a man?”

They had sat me down with them in a plain and unsophisticated sitting room. The room lacked any sort of lived-in feel; it was furnished, but the furniture was small and somehow sad. Still, on the way in I had noticed a staircase at the side of the house, leading down into the river. At the bottom was a wharf to which a small boat was attached. With all the possibilities of sailing in the river and playing in the forest, this seemed the perfect holiday home for a family with children.

If only it wasn't being used as a villains' hideout at the moment.

“It was not by design on Carpentier's part, either. It was pure happenstance. It certainly made for a rather thorny predicament.”

Armand explained every detail of the failed meeting at Quatre Saisons and the subsequent assault on our carriage, which had resulted in the necklace again slipping through his fingers. I stayed still in my chair, waiting for them to

finish their discussion. I had to act as though I didn't understand Lavian, so I was careful not to betray any response to their specific words. Instead I took in the room's interior design and the scene outside the window, concentrating on what I could hear without showing it.

"However," said Armand, "it is possible we can use *her* to get to the necklace. That royal guard seemed to care about her a great deal. If we propose an exchange, he's sure to comply with it."

His words brought all the men's gazes upon me. When I jumped in shock, it was not an act.

He continued, "After all, if it becomes widely known that a young noblewoman has been kidnapped, it will become a major scandal. He'll do all he can to avoid calling attention to it. I sincerely doubt he would involve the police or the military."

One of the men snorted. "Look at her. Surely she can't mean that much to anyone."

"She barely even looks like a noblewoman," said another. "No beauty or allure whatsoever. A plain, unrefined little girl. You sure she's not just a commoner in a nice dress?"

Well excuse me for being so plain! Thankfully your particular tastes don't especially concern me. But I let his mockery wash over me as well. I meticulously avoided the slightest response, instead portraying the perfect scared young lady.

In an offhand tone, Armand replied, "There's no accounting for taste. Perhaps his own good looks make him crave exactly the opposite in a partner—someone more modest and humble in appearance. And, for all we know, joining the military might give one a different sense of aesthetics than the rest of us."

This poorly thought out argument put my hackles up as well. *Are those honestly the best theories he can be bothered to come up with?*

Not that it mattered, of course. I was used to being mocked, and this was hardly what mattered right now. *But...could it be that Lord Simeon really does have a taste for women of a less ostentatious nature, in terms of both face and*

body?

He went on, "I can only hope that Grato and the others managed to escape, but with that particular man as their opponent, it's entirely likely they were captured. That means this location won't remain secret for much longer. It's best if we vacate it as soon as we can."

"Good heavens, what a useless lot you are," said the older gentleman, tutting in annoyance.

But I had the feeling he was the most useless one of all. Comfortably settled into his chair, he haughtily ordered the others to prepare for the move. The three men who seemed to be mere subordinates left the room, leaving only Armand and the leader.

In a lighthearted tone, Armand suggested, "Let's have Earl Serrault harbor us after we leave here. His wife is your cousin, so he'll probably feel unable to refuse."

"We must exercise some discretion!" replied the leader with a flustered glance at me.

Armand laughed. "Oh, it's quite all right. This woman doesn't appear to understand a word of Lavian. A young lady from a good family would normally be expected to have learned the languages of the surrounding nations, but as you can see from her slovenly appearance, she is royally incompetent. She doesn't even notice us talking about her right to her face. She merely looks away vacantly."

Indeed, it's just as you say. I had learned both Lavian and Easdalian as part of my upbringing. In fact, I know the languages of Linden and Vissel too. It's a matter of course for a noblewoman.

In hiding that, I had made the right choice. *Hmm... Earl Serrault's wife...* Yes, now that I thought about it, she was indeed of Lavian origin. I recalled that she was related to Earl Brondi in some way. If this man was her cousin, did that mean he was Earl Brondi himself? He didn't carry himself in a way that suggested such a high rank. *Let me think, what exactly was the relationship between Countess Serrault and Earl Brondi?*

“Nonetheless, she’s a Lagrangian noble, just as Earl Serrault and his family are. If they see this young lady, they’d surely recognize her.” He paused a moment. “Perhaps we don’t need to be such kind souls as to bring her with us purely because we have an exchange in mind. Why don’t we simply kill her and throw her into the river?”

I fought to conceal the alarm his words triggered in me. This was the development I had been most afraid of. Kidnappings with a profit motive did indeed tend to be unsuccessful in terms of the perpetrators receiving the ransom money, but this did not always mean the victim was safely returned either. It was far from uncommon for the victim to be murdered.

My impression of these men did not suggest that they would act so rashly, but that was far from a guarantee. I turned away slightly as I felt the cold sweat beneath my clothes.

“No, let’s not do anything rash,” said Armand. “If the corpse is discovered, the police really will get involved. Then we’ll certainly be left unable to trade for the necklace. Burying the body might be an option, but it would be impossible to do such a thing in this neighborhood without being seen.”

“Find a way!”

“It’s hardly that straightforward. But if you’re so sure, Baron, why don’t you kill her?”

“Me?” he spluttered. “Why me!?”

“I’ll accept responsibility for the disposal if you carry out the deed yourself.”

This was quite a conversation to be listening to. With all my might, I struggled against the urge to immediately jump through the window and run away. I knew that if I did attempt to escape on a whim without regard for the consequences, they would immediately catch me, and then I likely would be deemed too great a risk—in which case, I was *sure* to be killed. *I must do everything I can to avoid making them wary of me.*

Fortunately, this baron appeared to lack the fortitude to commit a murder. The degree to which Armand’s words perturbed him was almost amusing. “Th-th-that sort of business is what you lot are for! Don’t you realize I’m a

nobleman!? Are you suggesting I should sully my noble hands!?”

It seemed I had been correct in my assessment of him as an inexperienced amateur. Despite the gravity of the situation, he had the demeanor of a pampered little prince. All he did was self-importantly order the others around, keeping anything too dirty or scary far from his sight. The mere idea that he might take matters into his own hands vexed him greatly.

Leader or otherwise, he had the stench of a small-timer. It was not the baron I needed to worry about, but rather Armand.

Thankfully, it seemed Armand had no intention of killing me. “I’d ask you to refrain from trying to force others to do things you wouldn’t be comfortable doing yourself. Our aim should be to avoid aggravating matters any further. If his fiancée is murdered, that young man will fly into a rage and retaliate with full force. We do not want to antagonize House Flaubert or the military. The crown prince dotes on her as well. If we’re reckless enough to kill her, the consequences could be terrifying indeed. We’ll be far, far better off hiding her away and bringing her with us.”

The baron fell silent and made a disgruntled face. It seemed that danger was averted for now. Inside I felt a surge of relief.

But...how does Armand know that I’m close to His Highness? I don’t recall mentioning it during any of my visits to Bijoux Carpentier. Who was this person really?

“In any case,” Armand continued, “we’ll have time to rework our strategy once we’ve left this location behind and regrouped. I wouldn’t worry, the commemoration is not for another month or so. It won’t be a problem if our plans are delayed by one or two days.”

The baron huffed. “Nothing ruffles you, does it?”

“They say it’s not healthy to go through life in a state of constant agitation. Now, before we set off I’ll take a quick breather. I still haven’t eaten lunch.”

Armand stood from his chair and walked over to me.

“You’re taking her with you?” asked the baron.

“I assume you’d feel uncomfortable if I left her alone with you. Or would you rather watch her for now?”

“Hmph!” The baron turned away sullenly.

Armand smiled with only the corners of his mouth and grabbed my arms. “Come,” he said in Lagrangian. I obediently followed him out of the room to the kitchen, where he rummaged through a sack that had been left there. From it he produced some bread and cheese.

“Sit.” He pulled out a chair meant for servants and offered it to me. “Let’s eat together.”

Hesitating, I asked, “You mean to let me have some as well?”

“Apologies that it’s nothing more fancy than this. Hopefully it will do to quiet your stomach for the time being. It’s been rumbling incessantly.”

Reflexively I put a hand on my stomach. *Ugh, so it was audible after all.*

“I’ve had quite enough of you taking all this in your stride so thoroughly that your stomach is rumbling.” Then he laughed at his own joke as if very amused.

I sat down and indignantly replied, “Well, excuse me for not being nervous enough to satisfy you.”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. I’m very impressed. I’d expect nothing less from you, Marielle.”

I furrowed my brow quizzically. This overly familiar tone left me quite uncomfortable. *It’s as though his attitude has changed completely in an instant.* Even his face had taken on a remarkably kind expression.

“We’re dreadfully low on supplies, but I can brew some tea if you’d like. Wait just a moment, I’ll boil the water.”

“Oh, I...”

“Or would you prefer some wine? I could pour that straight away.”

“No,” I said, “tea will be fine.”

Armand winked and said, “Very well!” before setting about boiling the water. Unmistakably, his manner had changed. I stared intently at him as he moved

about briskly.

He was tall, and his solidly built physique made it clear he was well trained. Overall, his build was rather similar to Lord Simeon's, and... *Hmm, haven't I seen it somewhere before?* His body type was common in members of the military, but I had a sense that I had last seen this well-proportioned man in gentleman's clothes in rather different circumstances.

"Your eyes are about to drill a hole in my back," said Armand with a voice full of mirth. "Such a passionate gaze is sure to make me blush."

I narrowed my eyes. "Who are you?"

"Oh, you still haven't realized?" He turned only his head and smiled at me over his shoulder.

His facial features couldn't be described as youthful. The skin around his eyes had begun to wrinkle and droop. His deep voice also seemed in accordance with his age—and yet, a strange phenomenon was occurring whereby the more he spoke, the more his voice seemed to regress in age. If I had closed my eyes now, his voice alone would have suggested he was no older than a teenager or a man in his twenties. His eyes, too, blue as the sea, were brimming with youthful verve. In response to my own consternation, they sparkled with mischievous amusement.

Wait... Mischievous...?

"Oh!"

My mouth fell wide open. *Goodness! Those blue eyes! It must be!*

"You're...Lutin!?"

"And you've only just figured it out. How heartless of you, princess." Smiling with delight, Armand—or rather, Lutin—returned his attention to the pot before him. As I sat there entirely lost for words, he elegantly poured the tea.

"Here you go," he said, offering me the steaming cup. When I didn't put my hands on it just yet, he asked, "You're not going to drink? I know you don't have a sensitive tongue. If anything, you err towards enjoying it at *too* high a temperature."

“How do you know so much?”

“I know everything about the woman I love,” he said casually. He sat down opposite me, poured a cup for himself, and calmly put it to his lips.

I was still too overcome with surprise to really speak. He had transformed his appearance completely, but without a doubt, the man before me was Lutin, the mysterious thief. This man was a notorious criminal who had caused great alarm in several countries. We had met multiple times in the past. He had almost kidnapped me, and we had also fought on the same side. We seemed to be somehow connected by fate.

I had also learned that his true identity was that of a Lavian intelligence operative. His burglaries were merely a cover for his spying activities. From the point of view of someone leading an ordinary public life it felt odd to talk about either one being a cover for the other—both were rather surreptitious—but either way, we had become rather close acquaintances. Still, I had never expected to meet Lutin in this situation.

Today really does seem to be cursed somehow. Is it because I had that dream? Sighing, I began to wonder if something terrible was going to befall my wedding ceremony. Then I recalled the dangerous situation I was already in. *That's right! If I don't escape from here, there won't be a ceremony at all!*

“You’re awfully quiet today,” said Lutin as he cheerfully sliced the block of cheese. “I suppose being kidnapped puts even you out of sorts?”

While acknowledging that he was a master of disguise, the sight before my eyes was still difficult to believe. Not to mention that his voice, his speech patterns and the whole air about him had been utterly different compared to the previous times we had met. *This is what the work of a professional looks like, isn't it?* I became uncomfortably aware of how amateur my own disguises were by comparison.

He offered me a plate of bread and cheese. I put down the wedding ring box, which I'd been clutching all this time, and gladly accepted it.

But I did not eat yet. “It’s hard for me to feel at ease when your face looks so different.”

Though his voice and speech patterns had returned to normal, his appearance was still that of Armand, a somewhat older man—quite unlike the fresh-faced Lutin I knew. It felt very odd to be sitting across from him.

“Apologies, but I cannot take off my disguise. I haven’t told these men who I really am. My story is that I infiltrated Lagrange a long while ago and was recently ordered to assist with this plot. They think I’m the real Armand Cortot.”

“Oh, so Armand is a real person? What happened to him?”

I had raised my voice slightly when I spoke, and Lutin held up a finger and shushed me. “They’ll hear you. Please, a little restraint. You needn’t worry, the real Armand is safe and well.”

He rummaged around in the sack again and pulled out a small jar.

“Aha, here it is. Would you like some honey? I believe you like that as well, yes?”

“Thank you,” I said after a moment. I took the jar and spread some honey on top of the cheese. I liked the combination of honey and cheese—but how did he know that as well? I had never even told Lord Simeon.

I felt conflicted, but for now I sank my teeth into the bread. At last I could eat lunch. And, with no one around to scold me for being uncouth, I gave no mind to dining etiquette at all, opening my mouth widely and gorging myself.

Lutin explained, “A few days ago he received word that his parents, who live very far away, were on the verge of death, so he and Mrs. Cortot left home in an urgent hurry. There was no time to visit the shop in person so they asked for a message to be sent, but unfortunately it never arrived. But no one sensed anything amiss, for Armand turned up for work the next day and everything appeared to be perfectly normal. Until the ring was stolen, of course.”

“Because you had taken Armand’s place. So...the news about his parents was a lie, wasn’t it?”

“No harm in the occasional family visit, is there?” he said in a faintly self-satisfied tone. “It’s only respectful.”

I felt sorry for poor Armand. Perhaps this was good news for Claude

Carpentier, however. It meant he hadn't actually been betrayed by a trusted employee of the store.

Still, I thought to myself, I doubt he'll be able to relax until the ring is returned.

"That's right!" I said suddenly, bending forward. "The ring! You stole it, didn't you, you thief! Give it back this instant!"

"Don't worry, all in good time. Precious jewels are not my ultimate goal in this case, so I've fully intended to return the ring from the start. Though I must say, if they'd just kept the necklace in the store, this convoluted sequence of events wouldn't have been necessary."

"It sounds as though your preliminary research could have been better!" I replied, unintentionally slipping into my usual tone.

"My investigations told me it was indeed being kept at the store. I hadn't counted on them moving it immediately before I planned to steal it. Quite a miscalculation, I'll grant."

As he spoke, something jumped out at me. "What investigations are you referring to? You...didn't sneak into the palace recently, by any chance?"

Lutin didn't answer. He responded merely with a bold grin.

I sighed. *I knew it.* No wonder the knights on duty hadn't spotted any intruder. All the discussion between Lord Simeon and his fellow knights about whether the Order had grown negligent or their skills were declining were rendered irrelevant in the face of such an expert at infiltration. The only one who could have ever reached the closely guarded area surrounding the treasure vault was someone whose job it was to do so—but a good enough disguise could accomplish the same thing.

"It seemed to have occurred after the person in charge went home for the day, so I'm assuming you disguised yourself as a royal guard."

"It would have been more fun to transform into the Captain, or the crown prince, but neither of them share my eye color. That would be a rather awkward way to be uncovered as an impostor."

He was brazen enough to discuss this openly. And yet, somehow I feared that

if I brought this conversation up later on, it would be dismissed as not amounting to real evidence.

But before I can bring it up to anyone, first I must get away from here. Otherwise there will be no such thing as “later on.”

“Why on earth do you need the fake necklace, anyway?” I asked. “Earlier you mentioned something about a ‘commemoration’ —is that some sort of ceremony for the grand duke’s thirtieth wedding anniversary? Presumably an envoy will be sent from Lagrange to deliver the gift, and if the necklace that arrives is a fake, then... Oh, your plan is to switch them, and ensure the grand duchess is given the fake necklace? If you’re not after the jewels, then it must mean you intend to embarrass Lagrange, or some such?”

My question had somehow grown into a rather ill-tempered monologue. After I finished, Lutin quietly applauded. “What a clever girl you are, Marielle.”

I felt slightly offended at his tone, which was akin to that of an adult praising a child. “I thought I was ‘royally incompetent’?”

“I must keep the others off their guard. It’s more convenient for you to be underestimated as well, is it not? Those weren’t my true thoughts. You must understand.”

“It’s hard to be certain, honestly. I’ve never felt as though I have a sense of who you really are. Inside I’ve no doubt you were laughing as always.” I turned away sharply and drank my tea. It had grown slightly cold, but it was a brand I liked. *He can’t have chosen it intentionally, can he? There’s no way he could have anticipated this situation.*

“You can’t really think I was mocking you, surely? I’d never think so little of you. I know full well that you’re furnished with all the skills and knowledge a lady is raised to have. You can speak the languages of Lavia and Easdale, and even Linden and Vissel, isn’t that right? Though it seems your goal was not to be especially cultivated, but to be able to enjoy the novels published in each country. Perhaps fangirling is the ultimate driving force?”

“Again I ask you, how can you possibly know so much about me?” Just how much effort had he expended on investigating me? I was scared he might even know some personal details I’d rather have kept to myself. “In any case, will you

refrain from trying to distract me with trivial matters? I'm asking about the necklace. Are you really intending to swap—"

Lutin reached out and put a hand over my mouth. Then he turned to look toward the corridor. The sound of footsteps approached, walked past, then finally faded into the distance. He waited until the sound disappeared completely before moving his hand away.

In a hushed tone he said, "You must try to keep your voice down. But yes, the situation is more or less as you've deduced."

"But why do such a thing? I thought you had agreed to support the engagement between Prince Liberto and Princess Henriette. Why do something that could ruin it all? No, wait... You said the baron and the others don't know who you really are. You're only pretending to be their ally—to prevent them from swapping the necklaces. Those men must be from the Easdale faction."

He took a quick breath and stroked my cheek with the back of one finger. "I say this without any irony: you are very perceptive indeed. It pains me to think of returning you to the Vice Captain. Perhaps I shall take you back to Lavia with me instead?"

"Absolutely not! My wedding is in two days." I brushed off his hand.

His shoulders sagged and he looked down at the ring box I had placed on the table. "So there's still time. Stealing the bride away immediately before the wedding... Isn't that somehow romantic? It's like something out of a book."

"It's only romantic when her true love is rescuing her from a marriage she's being forced into. If Lord Simeon and I are pulled apart, that's not a romance, it's a tragedy."

"There are stories that start that way as well, aren't there? The kidnapped bride finds herself swayed by her kidnapper, and is torn between him and her fiancé. Until finally, in the end... That sort of thing."

"Yes, I've read stories like that, and fangirled over them. That sheik was so enticing, it was almost unfair! But my life is not like that!" I banged on the table to emphasize that I would not be going along with such a story outline. *But how can he know so much about my interests as a fangirl? Just how much does he*

know!? “So stop continuing to change the subject. If I’ve understood correctly, you’re not working against Lagrange. You’re trying to stop these men and their plan. But if so, there’s surely no need to get your hands on the necklace at all. You don’t have to go ahead with the trade.”

My attempt to pull the conversation back on course was met with another one of Lutin’s smiles that left me unable to read his emotions. “The last incident allowed us to constrain the Easdale faction’s movements quite considerably, but even so, it was only the actual perpetrators that we were able to dispose of. The true puppet masters are still going strong. However, we cannot act against them directly. They’re too important, and it would amount to breaking off our relations with Easdale altogether. Lavia has to treat Lagrange and Easdale as equally important rather than tying ourselves too tightly to one side or the other.”

“Yes, I certainly understand that.”

Lavia, which was sandwiched between two great powers, had suffered from being in the middle of their fierce rivalry for a very long time indeed. Even within Lavia, there were opposing factions that favored either Lagrange or Easdale. One of the main difficulties faced by past grand dukes was that of how to effectively lead the country in a way that preserved its independence. Even now, there was an endless supply of potential catalysts for unrest.

“Which is why this case needs to be handled delicately as well,” Lutin explained. “The baron and his cohorts are, to put it bluntly, small fry, but the important figures backing them are rather more troublesome. I have to do what I can to stop this scheme without making the latter intervene. As such, I wanted to handle it internally, without making either Lagrange or Easdale aware of it.”

“Sadly for you, Lord Simeon found out about it.”

“Indeed. What a terrible nuisance.” Lutin clasped his hands together behind his head and leaned back in his chair. “I intended to let the plan proceed until shortly before the necklace was to be swapped, then seize the men just before the swap could take place. If I catch them in the act so blatantly that it allows for no excuses, even the important figures backing them wouldn’t be able to intervene. Their aim is to provoke a dispute between Lagrange and His Majesty

the Grand Duke about the gift of a necklace being made up of fake jewels, thus destroying all the work that has been done to secure Prince Liberto and Princess Henriette's engagement. The details of their plot leaked a while ago, so the grand duke is well aware of it already, but leaving it there seemed awfully dull. Since this opportunity had presented itself, why not use it to turn the tables? And I assumed that if it was merely a sample product that was stolen, it wouldn't cause much damage to Bijoux Carpentier—and that they would never intentionally reveal anything about it either, since it would affect their reputation. I'd arranged everything perfectly to ensure I could resolve it all without making it known that there was any internal discord. So why did you two have to poke your noses into it?"

The way he spoke suggested he really felt very inconvenienced by it. Unwilling to let that slip by without comment, I retorted, "It's you that involved us! The ones who have really been made to suffer through all this are me and Lord Simeon. Not to mention Claude, his father, and the real Armand—I feel sorry for them as well. But at practically the very last minute, with our wedding just two days away, we lost our wedding rings, and then, almost as soon as we recovered them, we became embroiled in a case we obviously couldn't overlook...and then I was kidnapped! As much as I understand Lavia's position, I can't help complaining about how this has affected me."

"I suppose you and I really are connected. Fated to continue meeting one another."

"Don't try to make it sound so auspicious. Ill-fated, perhaps."

Laughing, Lutin sat up again. "I suspect Prince Liberto will give me a scolding, but I have no choice but to change the plan. Knowing the Vice Captain, even if I don't tell him, he'll discover the truth purely based on the information he has so far. Better for me to confess everything to him before things get too out of hand."

His words gave me hope at last. I bent forward, leaning on the table with my hands. "So, in that case..."

Lutin placed his own hands over mine as if to disabuse me of my ideas. "I will confess it all *privately*. I cannot let the baron and his men know that I've told

anyone. And, of course, I'll insist that you continue to accompany me for now."

"Accompany you? No, I have no interest in that whatsoever. I told you, my wedding is in two days. Let me go back to Lord Simeon right now. And return Duke Silvestre's ring."

I tried to pull my hands back, but he held on too tightly and I couldn't move. Lutin stood up and leaned forward over the table. "I've never intended to give up even after you were married, but this is a chance I cannot pass up. I won't let the caged bird fly free—it's not in my nature. I suppose that reflects poorly on me."

His blue eyes drilled into me with intense pressure. When I pulled my body away, attempting to escape, his hands only pulled mine back toward him. I ended up in a position where I was practically climbing up onto the table. Our faces were so close that I could feel his breath.

"That is a bad joke," I said at last. "Stop it at once."

"Those are my true feelings. I'm always serious toward you. When I tell you that I love you, and that I wish to steal you away from the Vice Captain, it's all true. And if I became just a tiny bit more serious, stealing a bride away would be the easiest thing in the world."

"Lutin..."

"Call me Emidio."

In stark contrast to the overbearing force he was applying, his voice had become thoroughly sweet and gentle. Despite the alarming things he was saying, I didn't feel any fear.

His lips touched upon my cheek. Had he avoided my lips on purpose, as his own form of acting the gentleman?

Next I felt his hot breath in my ear. "If you're going to call me anything, I ask that it be my name."

I was surprised at myself for not feeling any discomfort at his behavior. I suddenly felt extremely guilty. *This is not the time to be feeling any pleasure. He doesn't excite me at all—no, not at all, not in any sense. No! My heart is*

definitely not wavering. The only one I love is Lord Simeon.

At last I replied, “But that’s not your real name either, is it?”

“It is my real name. I told you that, didn’t I?”

“Didn’t you say it was merely a name used on official documents? If it’s your real name, the one your parents gave you, then I’ll use it. But if it’s just a name you’ve latched onto as a matter of convenience, why should I stop calling you Lutin? It’s essentially the same either way.”

“Whatever you call me would become my real name. If you don’t care for Emidio, I’d be perfectly happy with another name. You can give me a new name if you like. I’ll adopt it as my own.”

What is he talking about? So he ultimately has no intention of telling me his real name? Conversations with Lutin always felt like a game played with words. Before you knew it, he had ducked and dived away from the real topic at hand.

I glared at him. “It’s difficult to take you seriously with that face.”

Lutin arched his eyebrows and smiled as if to admit defeat. “Certainly, I would prefer to woo you with my own face. Shall we leave it there for the time being?”

He let my hands go and sat down again. Free to move at last, I breathed a sigh of relief. It’s not that I had been scared, but...well, no, actually, I had indeed been scared. It seemed that I was rapidly being drawn in by him, and that terrified me. Much as it might have seemed otherwise at times, I didn’t hate Lutin. He’d caused me great consternation and made me very cross, but I didn’t hate him. However, I also didn’t think I had any romantic feelings toward him at all. And yet, when he made an effort to seduce me, I began to feel as though I didn’t know my own feelings anymore. That was frightening.

In the story where the protagonist was kidnapped by the sheik, her heart ended up torn between two men. Her kidnapper was dashing and exciting—when I read about him, my heart pounded—but, honestly speaking, I didn’t want the protagonist to have a change of heart. No matter how compelling a twist it would be for her to fall for the sheik, I wanted her to persist and stand by her first love.

So I won't have a change of heart either. I will always, always love Lord Simeon and no one else.

I was eager to be by Lord Simeon's side again. I wanted to leap into his arms, be held tightly against his chest, and have these strange feelings driven away.

I wondered what he was doing right now. He was worried, no doubt. He was probably working flat out to find my location. *I have to get back to him soon. I don't want to make him worry any longer.*

Through the window I could see that the sky had dulled slightly. In just a few short hours, the sun would set. *Is there no way I can escape before that? They're planning to move somewhere else, so perhaps they'll leave an opening. Yes, I'll wait for my chance. I mustn't be impatient.*

"Care for a second helping?" asked Lutin, returning to the subject of lunch as though nothing had happened. "There's still some remaining."

Most crucially, I must ensure that Lutin does not suspect anything. What I had to do was very clear, yet at the same time seemed maddeningly difficult.

Chapter Six

Deciding that I would look for an opening was all well and good, but of course Lutin was not about to offer me one on a silver platter.

Even once we finished eating, he gave no sign that he'd leave me unattended for a moment. Nor did his comrades call for him, perhaps because their preparations for the move weren't causing them too much difficulty.

I sighed to myself several times while sitting in my plain chair.

Noticing this, he said gently, "Are you tired? I ask you to endure just a little longer. We'll be leaving here soon."

He treated me very politely. He brought out fruit for dessert while apologizing that it was all he could offer, and when I said the room was growing hot and stuffy, he opened the window for me. He paid attention to making me feel as comfortable as possible.

But he did not give me my freedom. Even as they glinted cheerfully, his blue eyes did not overlook a single one of my movements. Watched so intently at such close distance, I couldn't even use my special ability of blending into the scenery to help me escape.

After a while I asked him, "Do you have the stolen ring with you?" I decided that if I couldn't escape, perhaps I could at least get the ring back.

He nodded lightly and took the box out of his pocket. "Would you like to see it?"

He handed it to me without reservation. *Is he entirely unafraid that I might take it from him?*

But then, why would he have feared that? Even if I snatched the ring at this point and didn't give it back, what would it really have changed about the situation? If I couldn't get it back into the Carpentiers' hands, and subsequently Duke Silvestre's, it was all meaningless.

I took the leather-covered ring box. Just like mine, it fit neatly into my grasp and was branded with the Bijoux Carpentier mark. My hands began to tremble as I considered that the item inside this tiny box was worth three million algiers.

I'd already heard it described as a diamond ring, but the sight that appeared when I opened it was unlike anything I had imagined. It was not a single immense stone set by itself, nor was it an intricate setting covered tightly with many jewels. Rather, it was a streamlined and understated design. Five moderately sized diamonds were lined up on the platinum setting with tiny stones encircling them.

Nonetheless, I could tell at a glance that it was immensely valuable. The five stones were colored diamonds arranged to form a gradient: deep purple, periwinkle, mauve, pink, and magenta.

Colored diamonds command a far higher price than normal diamonds. Yellow ones are found rather commonly so they're not so expensive, but the ones used here, with hues of blue, purple, and pink, were very scarce.

Claude had said it cost two million algiers to procure the stones. I'd been surprised when I heard that, but looking at these, it no longer sounded excessive at all.

The design was not especially gaudy. It was constructed in an exceedingly simple and elegant manner. There would no doubt be people who saw it and mistook the jewels for mere rubies and sapphires, thus concluding the ring wasn't much to speak of. I might have thought the same if I hadn't been told beforehand that they were diamonds. This sort of masterpiece demanded deeper knowledge on the observer's part as well.

I wasn't sure how to react to Duke Silvestre's choice to buy a ring like this. Were simple designs to his wife's taste? Was it overly suspicious of me to wonder if he enjoyed the idea of a ring that hid its true value, as another one of his malicious pranks?

"Is that the sort of ring you like?" asked Lutin. I had been staring at it rather intently.

I replied, "I think it's very pretty, but it wouldn't suit me. My status is not equal to it."

“Oh? Well, I suppose it is a slightly grown-up design. Perhaps a heart-shaped pink diamond would suit you better.”

After casually making that suggestion, he then picked up my own ring box from the table without asking.

“Do you mind?” I said.

He looked inside and flashed an ironic smile. “Plain gold rings without any adornments at all? How very like the Vice Captain.”

I sensed he was mocking Lord Simeon. I became slightly indignant. “They’re wedding rings. That’s how they’re meant to look.”

“More showy designs have become popular in recent years. What about your engagement ring? Did he not give you one?”

“Of course he did.”

“I don’t recall ever seeing you wear it. Is it not to your taste?”

“That’s not the reason! It’s more that it’s too special to wear every day, or...perhaps that I feel somehow intimidated by it.”

I hid my bare ring finger without meaning to. This was a subject I felt somewhat guilty about, so when he drew attention to it I couldn’t help feeling targeted. Indeed, Lord Simeon had given me a ring shortly after we officially became engaged. It was a gorgeous piece of jewelry with a gleaming diamond. He’d bought it with only honorable intentions—he’d never do anything with the intention of mocking me. Still, that ring felt entirely out of place on my finger.

It was too fine. It didn’t suit me at all, and I didn’t own any dresses that weren’t thoroughly outshone by it. So, aside from special occasions, I had put it away and chosen not to wear it, under the pretext that it was too special to wear every day.

At that time, Lord Simeon and I hadn’t known much about each other’s tastes. He’d no doubt sought advice about what an engagement ring was supposed to look like, and had thus chosen the most popular stone and the most traditional design. A heart-shaped pink diamond would never have occurred to Lord Simeon. Ring designs were something he’d probably never

thought about in any great detail at all.

It's not that I'm dissatisfied. I love him the way he is. Only, if I really had to choose, a very slightly smaller diamond would have been preferable.

"I'll grow into it as I get older," I continued, "so I'll keep it safe until such time as I have a little more of the appropriate dignity about me."

"I'd have expected a young lady like yourself to enjoy decorating yourself with fine things. Maybe I'll find a ring to give you that's more suitable."

"No thank you. It's not as though I have any strong interest in jewels to begin with."

I held out my hand and Lutin obediently closed the lid and handed the box back to me. In return he took back the duke's ring from me. As he put it in his pocket, he said, "Personally, I wouldn't have had a hackneyed phrase like 'With Eternal Love' engraved on my wedding rings, but something more like 'Let's Enjoy Life Together.'"

Yet another criticism. I opened my mouth to reply, but suddenly the door opened.

"How long are you going to sit here lollygagging?" said one of the baron's underlings, who had appeared in the doorway. "We're setting off."

I immediately shrank back and pretended I was terrified.

"Understood," Lutin replied, abruptly changing his voice and mannerisms. "You, young lady. We'll be taking you with us for the time being."

He made me stand and brought me with him out into the corridor and toward the front door. I wondered if they planned to have Earl Serrault shelter them, as Lutin had suggested to the baron. But would Earl Serrault really be so accommodating if they turned up so suddenly? Hiding me would present quite a risk, so perhaps they'd chosen another place to lie low. Somehow they would also have to reunite with the men they'd left behind.

Once outside, I looked up at the sky. The sun had sunk considerably from its apex. One way or another, I had to escape before too much time passed. If I dawdled, night would fall and it would be more difficult for Lord Simeon to

track me.

There had to be a way to escape now. A way to put myself out of their reach.

I glanced at the river. If I had any chance at all, that was it.

Lutin brought me over to the carriage, and the baron asked with a distasteful air, “Do you mean to have *her* ride with us?”

“She’d look rather conspicuous riding on a horse instead,” Lutin replied.

“Put her in another carriage, then. How depressing it would be, riding with a woman like that. Get her out of my sight.”

“There is no other carriage. We had one, but we had to leave it behind.”

“Is there something wrong with your eyes? There’s one right there, is there not?” The baron pointed to the carriage we had arrived in.

With a troubled face, Lutin—probably quite exasperated on the inside—scratched his head. “This carriage belongs to House Flaubert. It’s clearly marked with their crest. If you’d like to give our pursuers an easy target, you can be my guest.”

“Then...call a fiacre!” The baron stamped his feet like a selfish child. He was so determined to avoid riding with me that he was spouting clearly impossible orders.

“No, we can’t do that either,” said Lutin. “If she starts making a fuss during the journey, the driver might notice and word would spread about us. You may have forgotten, but we are still in the city. We cannot behave in a way that attracts attention.”

“Then...knock her out! If she’s unconscious, she can’t make a fuss. Do it! Now!”

The baron nodded toward his surrounding underlings. They began to close in, obeying their master’s order.

Lutin stood in front of me and held out his arms to block them. “Calm down, now. Just because you make such menacing faces...”

Even when I nestled against his back, he didn’t turn around. Perhaps he

thought I was terrified that the scene was about to explode into violence, or that I was pretending to feel that way for the others' benefit. Either way, he had left his back and sides completely defenseless. Had he judged that there was nothing I could do anyway?

In that moment when his attention was entirely distracted, I reached my hand into his pocket, quick as a flash.

"Huh!?" he exclaimed.

Grabbing the ring box, I abruptly turned and set off running. Behind me, the men's voices were cacophonous. I discarded all sense of embarrassment as I bundled up my skirt and ran with all my might toward the rear of the house.

Behind me I heard further clamor. One man cried out, "Wha—!?" and another said, "What are you doing? Get out of the way!" Yet another shouted in pain and said, "Don't step on me!"

I took a quick glance behind. Somehow the men had clustered together awkwardly and were stumbling over each other. Had they begun to chase me, then collided with one another? *It's hard to believe that Lutin would do something so obtuse...*

But I had no time to waste thinking about that. Whatever had happened, it was a stroke of good fortune for me. I had to take advantage of the little time I had. My goal was the small boat floating in the river. I reached the staircase at the side out of the house and practically leapt down it. I reached the wharf and set about untying the rope that fixed the boat to its mooring post. Fortunately it wasn't tied too tightly, but it had been wrapped around the post so many times that it took more than a few moments to unravel. It was also rather a challenge to do this while holding two ring boxes.

All the while, the voices of my pursuers came closer. "She's trying to escape via the river!" "That wench! Don't let her get away!"

I was sure I wasn't going to make it. I urged myself to hurry. I unwound the rope as if my life depended on it.

At last I succeeded in freeing the boat from its mooring. With nothing to hold it back, the boat began to move. As my heart shriveled up in fear at the sounds

right behind me, I jumped into the boat.

“Aaaah! I, uh, oof!”

The boat shook violently as I landed. I was almost tossed into the water. I held onto the sides of the boat for dear life as a dreadful amount of water splashed all over me. Even if I didn’t fall off, I felt at risk of capsizing.

After some struggle I managed to let go and prostrate myself on the bottom of the boat. It was no use fighting against it—I had to make myself part of the boat. If it was shaking, I had to shake along with it.

In all likelihood, only a few brief moments had passed. To me it felt like a horrifying eternity. But, after I withstood the turbulence for long enough, it finally subsided.

I had avoided capsizing. I let out a breath. The men’s voices were still audible, but they were rapidly fading into the distance. I lifted my head and saw that the boat was being carried along by the current and was progressing along the river at quite a pace. The baron’s underlings were running back up the staircase now, while Lutin alone still stood on the wharf, watching me depart. Enough distance had opened up that I couldn’t see his expression clearly, but I had the sense he was smiling.

Could it be that...he let me go?

Had he prevented the others from catching up to me? It seemed inconceivable that I could have gotten away otherwise. *But...why do such a thing? He had all but told me he wasn’t going to let me go free.*

I began to sit up slowly, careful to avoid rocking the boat. I didn’t understand Lutin’s true intentions, but for now at least I had escaped from my predicament. Taking a calmer look around, I saw that my boat was positioned halfway between the banks on each side of the river. I spent a few more moments looking behind me, but my pursuers did not reappear, and even if they ran after me they would not have been able to reach me from the shore. Nor would they have had any means to stop the boat from floating down the river. They didn’t have another boat that I had seen. Most likely they had decided it was better to make their escape than delay trying to recapture me. They thought I didn’t understand Lavian, so they might have assumed there was no risk of me

divulging their identities or their destination.

Feeling calmer, I found a relatively comfortable sitting position inside the boat. Then, suddenly, I remembered the rings in a panic. I looked around inside the boat and to my intense relief found both of the ring boxes. *Thank goodness. I thought they might have fallen into the river when the boat was shaking.*

I carefully lifted the boxes into my lap and took another glance at my surroundings. I had somehow managed to escape successfully, but what was I to do now? The art of rowing a boat was not part of a young lady's education, so I had never done it. *Perhaps I can simply imitate how I've seen it done before?* I tried picking up the oars, but they were heavier than I expected. *I'm supposed to move these to paddle through the water? Impossible!* Impossible for me, at any rate. I had never seen a woman row a boat before, and it was clear that the oars were geared towards men's use.

I quickly gave up on this prospect and let the oars go. Rather than attempting to row and failing miserably, I decided it would be better to let myself be carried by the current. *If I keep going, I'll soon reach the city center. There are always trading boats passing through there, so I'll be able to ask for help.*

It seemed such a simple plan, but alas, the world was not so kind.

The flow was still rather rapid at this point, and my small boat was picking up speed at an alarming rate. Soon I no longer felt safe even just sitting there in the boat. Once again I gripped the sides and withstood the shaking, but when I reached a bend in the river, I was almost thrown into the water.

I screamed in panic. "Nooooo!"

Th-th-this is scary. Incredibly scary. I never thought boating could be such a suspenseful thrill ride! How on earth am I supposed to elegantly hold up a parasol under these circumstances!?

I supposed that was a spectacle more often seen downriver, where the flow was more gentle and people of all classes could enjoy themselves. This area was reserved for more upper-class pursuits.

I screamed again as the river curved sharply. It would have been nice, at least, if the boat had turned along with the river, but instead it veered closer to the

edge and collided with the bank. I was struck with a greater impact than anything so far. *I-I-I'm going to fall in. I'm going to capsize. I know it.*

I heard a voice call out to me. “Don’t thrash about! Stay still!”

Had someone spotted me? I wanted to tell them, *I'm not thrashing about on purpose!* I simply couldn’t regain a stable posture inside the wildly swaying boat. I thought about lying down again, but I was being thrown back and forth too vigorously for that. I was flung into one side of the boat and I lost my balance. Just in my field of vision, I saw two small objects fly through the air.

“No!”

The ring boxes. Both of them were falling toward the water. When I reflexively reached out my hands to try and stop them, the boat tipped over violently.

I screamed.

There was no longer anything to stop me. My face fell rapidly closer to the water’s surface—and then I was surrounded by cold.

“Marielle!”

Did someone call my name? I heard it faintly. It sounded like *his* voice. But I couldn’t confirm it. I couldn’t do a thing. Unable to swim, I was dragged deeper into the water.

It’s cold. My legs won’t move. Which way is the surface? I didn’t know water was this heavy. I can’t fight against the current. I’m running out of breath. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. How do I float back upwards?

My dress coiled around me and became a weight, and I sank toward the bottom of the river. The fear that I was about to die began to overcome me. Unable to hold my breath any longer, I opened my mouth and air slipped out—and a rush of water surged in. In an instant, my consciousness began to fade and I lost the power to even struggle.

...Lord Simeon...

Something forceful pulled at me. An arm had grabbed me. My inability to respond seemed to be a help rather than a hindrance. The person faced no

resistance in strongly pulling me up through the water. Suddenly the world around me was loud again. My senses returned, and the rushing water was deafening in my ears. My head had breached the water's surface—in my hazy awareness, I could just about tell that much.

But I couldn't breathe. Even though I had been rescued, I still couldn't inhale properly.

"This way!" someone else called.

Another pair of hands latched onto me from above and strongly pulled me up. My body bashed against something hard.

I felt a different weight than I had moments earlier. Not the weight of the water surrounding me, but my own body weight. I understood that I had been lifted out of the water entirely, but I couldn't move, and my consciousness was drifting farther and farther away.

If I can't breathe even after leaving the water...am I going to die after all?

I wanted to see Lord Simeon's face one last time. I wanted to kiss him. How I'd longed to be with him forever. Holding one another, smiling at one another, sometimes even arguing with him and being scolded by him...

I received a strong shock to my back. I choked painfully, and the awareness that had grown distant was wrenched back inside me. I had no time to make sense of what was going on before I was struck a second time, and a third. *That hurts! If you hit me that hard, it's going to hurt! Who are you to do such a cruel thing to a lady!?*

I spluttered, and the water lodged deep in my chest spurted out of my mouth. I spat up a surprising amount and then continued to cough violently, painfully. All I could do was choke—I still could not breathe normally. My throat made a strained sound and tears welled in my eyes.

Then I was turned onto my back and I felt someone leaning on me. Before I could make another sound, their lips rested on mine and breathed air into my lungs. They moved away for a moment and I coughed again, then they returned and put their lips on mine once more.

After repeating this twice, a third time, my spasming chest finally began to

calm down. At last I was about to breathe on my own again. I took a much-needed deep breath.

What a relief. To think I'd be so grateful to be able to do something as ordinary as breathing. I do it every moment to stay alive but I'm hardly even aware of it—but as soon as I was deprived of it, I felt the pain so keenly. Despite what a grim occurrence this had been, a small part of me could not help thinking about how useful this hard-to-come-by experience would be for my writing. I knew it was silly even for me, but that's a writer's nature.

"Marielle!" said an anxious voice. I opened my eyes in response, and a pair of light blue eyes were looking directly at mine. *The man I love.* Droplets of water dripped from his wet blond hair, and the tears in the corners of his eyes spilled down in relief and joy. *He's here. He came to save me, just as I hoped.*

"Marielle, can you hear me?"

Lord Simeon put a hand on my cheek. It was warm. I really felt as though I had returned to life. *I'm alive. I didn't have to leave this man behind.*

I fought through my exhaustion to answer, but I could barely even form the words. "Lord...Sime..."

His strained face twisted into a mixture of laughter and tears. He clung onto me as if to reassure me that everything was all right.

"Heavens, you scared us half to death," came another voice from beside him. *Now that I think of it, I was rescued by two people, wasn't I?*

Still firmly in Lord Simeon's arms, I looked to the side and saw another man, mostly still dry. The soft curls of his honey-colored hair glistened in the sunlight.

My mouth fell open in a stunned silence. If I weren't in such a state, I'm quite sure I would have reacted more loudly upon seeing him.

"Don't get me wrong, I find the astounding things you say and do wholly entertaining. Still, this is the sort of surprise I'd prefer you to avoid."

Our eyes met. His smile was gentle but a little strained. His golden brown skin showed his southern heritage, and his beautiful facial features had a feminine allure. His eyes drooped slightly, making him appear kind. They were the same

honey color as his hair and hid a masculine vigor.

Enchanted as ever by his unique beauty, I began, “Ambassador Ni—”

But I could not complete even his name before another voice pierced the air.

“What in heavens do you think you’re doing!? You appear out of the blue, and just as suddenly you’re falling into the river and almost drowning! You’ve always been a mystifying creature, but I demand you at least keep your strange behavior to dry land! Since when have you been amphibious!?”

If I was amphibious I certainly wouldn’t have nearly drowned, is what I wanted to interject, but she continued to rant on, so instead I enjoyed looking at this young lady’s gorgeous blonde hair and stunning good looks, which were akin to a rose in full bloom. Only, for some reason I couldn’t see her clearly. *Why is she so blurry?*

“My boat *and* my dress are sopping wet thanks to all of you!” she complained. “And it’s a brand new dress! I insist you dry it off at once!”

The aforementioned gentleman laughed and said, “You’re asking the impossible, my lady.”

In response, she took on the countenance of a cat with its fur standing on end. *She’s just a little scared and taken aback*. I smiled at her in the manner I would if I wanted to soothe a cat. “Lady Aurelia... You’re looking beautiful today.”

This young lady, the greatest beauty in Lagrange’s royal court, was the lovably villainous Aurelia Cavaignac, daughter of Marquess Cavaignac. “Has your near-death experience turned you unhinged!?” Suddenly she cocked her head in thought. “No, I suppose you were just as strange to begin with. Does that mean you’re back to normal now? Shall I take that as a sign that you’re all right?”

Strength finally began to return to my body. With Lord Simeon still embracing me, I managed to sit up. “Ambassador Nigel, Lady Aurelia, are you on a date? Ambassador, you’re moving quickly after only recently taking up your post.”

Taking a calmer look at my surroundings, it seemed I was on a boat. It was larger than the one I had ridden in, with a boatman working the oars. It appeared I had been carried far enough downriver to reach the portion where

couples enjoyed a relaxed time boating on the river. *What stroke of good luck that their boat was there, and I could be pulled aboard directly after Lord Simeon rescued me from the water.* It almost seemed planned somehow, but I was fairly sure it could only have been a coincidence.

Enjoying a day with Lady Aurelia was Nigel Shannon, who had recently taken up his post as Easdale's new ambassador to Lagrange. Seeing his face directly after hearing about some nefarious deeds planned by Lavia's Easdale faction made me suspect some possible connection. However, since Lutin had said he was dealing with it internally, I doubted they were working together. That said, I knew that Lutin and Ambassador Nigel *had* met before, and apparently got on rather well.

Still, if the ambassador was conspiring with Lutin, I doubted he would be enjoying a casual afternoon of boating. Not to mention that my escape on a boat had been on the spur of the moment; it was not something anyone could have foreseen. *So I'm sure I'm overthinking matters. Relatively sure, at least.*

The ambassador, who was still young and was exceptionally attractive, had quickly become a favorite of the ladies in society. Day after day, he shirked his duties and spent his time enjoying their company instead. Was he here purely for pleasure today as well, I wondered?

As I stared at him intently, Ambassador Nigel responded with nothing but his own gaze. Hiding my suspicions, I said, "Thank you for saving me. Still, I'm jealous that you've been able to enjoy a boat ride with Lady Aurelia. How selfish to monopolize the golden rose that stands at the heart of Lagrange's royal court."

"Hmm, is that all?" he replied. "It looked as though you were about to say something else."

Lady Aurelia quickly interjected, "Wh-what are you talking about? Stop it at once, you're making me uncomfortable!" She moved away from me with a rather distressed look.

Laughing softly, Ambassador Nigel moved to sit beside her. Together, they looked like a splendid painting of a couple. Truly a feast for the eyes—only, I couldn't see the details clearly because they were blurred. As I wondered why,

Lord Simeon's large hand embraced my cheek and turned my head to face him.

He peered down at me anxiously. "More important, are you unhurt, Marielle? Is there any way in which you still feel unwell?"

When I looked up at his pretty face, so close to mine and without his glasses covering it, my own worries faded and happiness welled up in me again. *Yes, Lord Simeon is here. I can feel his body heat. What a joy that is!* Unable to hold myself back, I reached out and put my arms around his neck. He embraced me back and it made me very glad.

"I'm quite all right," I told him. "Thank you for saving me."

"No, I'm sorry for causing you such anguish. If I'd only located you sooner... But, no, my bigger mistake was not protecting you in the first place. I truly am sorry."

"It's absolutely fine. I never doubted for a moment that you would come to find me—and you managed it sooner than I expected. Well done for being in the right place at the right time."

When I thought about it, that really was incredibly good luck. I was drowning, and felt sure I was about to die, and he had arrived just in the nick of time.

"I applied some pressure to the men who were left behind with me, and they divulged the location their comrades were running to. They couldn't tell me specifically, however—only that it was a holiday home on the riverbank, so I was searching along the river. How did you come to be in that boat, anyway? Did they abandon you?"

"I saw an opening to escape and I took it. I decided that if I were on the river, they'd be unable to follow me. Speaking of which, did you 'apply pressure' using questioning techniques you were trained in by the Royal Order of Knights? Did you make the men yield by slowly driving them mad and stoking fear inside their hearts? Was it a military-style interrogation that would terrify even a professional spy?"

"No, I just subjected them to some pain. Apparently they had never received any training in how to withstand torture, so I assumed if I hurt them enough that they thought I might kill them, they would open their mouths."

“Torture!? The sort of horrible torment only the Demon Vice Captain is capable of... How that thought sets my fangirl heart aflame. Did you use the riding crop?”

“Of course not!”

Watching our exchange, Ambassador Nigel said, “You really are an interesting pair. Miss Marielle, you almost died, and yet your eyes are sparkling again already.”

“Ambassador,” said Lady Aurelia coldly, “if you pay attention to every little word that girl says, you’ll be driven insane. She’s not right in the head.”

Ooh, that aloof expression makes me swoon as well. I wish I could see her more clearly, but my vision is so blurry for some reason. Wait, it’s because I don’t have my glasses on! But...what happened to them? Oh, that’s right, they must have fallen into the river.

I glanced toward the water and let out a hefty sigh—and then, all of a sudden, I remembered something far worse.

“Oh no!” I shrieked, alarming everyone on the boat, including Lord Simeon. Even the boatman turned to look at me, his eyes wide.

I didn’t have time to be bothered by their reactions. I leapt up out of Lord Simeon’s arms, went to one side of the boat and leaned over it.

Lord Simeon quickly pulled me back. “What are you doing? You’ll fall in again!”

“The rings! The rings, they...!”

“The rings?”

Held by Lord Simeon, I cast my eyes across the water. I was searching for the ring boxes, hoping desperately that they might be floating on the surface nearby.

“Our wedding rings?” Lord Simeon asked.

“Those, and Duke Silvestre’s ring. They all fell into the river.”

I could not see any sign of them. They were not there. Either they had been

carried along by the current, or they had sunk. Either way, there was no trace of either of the ring boxes anywhere in the vast river.

Ambassador Nigel gazed around at the river in the same manner. “Now that I recall, it did look as though a couple of small items fell in just before you did. Sadly, I think there’s no choice but to give up. It’s no use even searching for them.”

I became giddy all of a sudden, as though I was about to lose my balance. Lord Simeon put his arms around me, supporting and embracing me, while over and over I said, “What am I going to do?” I knew I was repeating myself like a fool, but I couldn’t help it. Then I added, “I tried so hard... I kept our rings and recovered the duke’s... And then... Oh, it’s all my fault!”

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon.

“What will I tell the duke? It was such an incredible ring! How will I ever apologize to Claude? I couldn’t ever hope to repay the amount it’s worth...”

“Marielle, it’s all right.” He put a hand around my head and drew me into his chest. Speaking directly in my ear in a sturdy tone, he said. “It’s completely all right. You needn’t worry about a thing. I will talk to the duke. You don’t need to be upset. I will take care of everything.”

His strong, kind voice brought me back to my senses. As ever, Lord Simeon was able to rescue me from my anxiety and fear. I was wrapped up in his reassuring arms, knowing that as long as he was holding me, there was nothing to be afraid of. With his warmth and steadfast strength surrounding me, my disordered mind settled down again.

“No, that won’t do,” I said at last, putting my hands on Lord Simeon’s chest to push myself away slightly. “This is my responsibility. I must talk to Duke Silvestre. I’m scared of how he’ll react, but...I cannot simply run away.”

“But, Marielle—” he tried to interject.

“It was my decision to get into the boat when I had no way of steering it. I was thinking purely of my escape, optimistically hoping that if I simply let the river carry me along, I’d find rescue at some point. This is the consequence of that foolishness. It’s my own fault.” Tears welled in my eyes. My cheeks were wet

again already.

I thought I'd skillfully fled my captors, but in fact I'd only made the situation worse. Lutin had promised that he would return the ring at some point, but I was so impatient due to the short amount of time remaining before my wedding that I just couldn't wait. I wanted to get back to Lord Simeon's side sooner—even if only *slightly* sooner—and so I had thought single-mindedly about escaping.

And this was the result. I had committed a terrible blunder—that was the undeniable truth.

I covered my face. "I'm so sorry that this happened..."

It was no time to be crying, but I felt so apologetic toward so many people that I shamefully could not hold back.

"You're the victim in this situation," said Lord Simeon soothingly. "The loss of the rings was a consequence of today's events, and you were not the cause of them. So please, don't blame yourself. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But—" I began, still sobbing as Lord Simeon soothed me.

Ambassador Nigel interrupted. "I can't say I understand the situation, but let's return to dry land for now and do something about the fact that you're dripping wet. If you were a man I'd have no trouble letting you grin and bear it, but I cannot leave a lady shivering." He took off his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. Then he turned toward the boatman. "Pull up to the bank."

The boatman did as commanded. I could see a wharf slightly ahead, with the same sort of steps up from it as I had raced down earlier. Two figures stood waiting at the top.

Meanwhile, Lady Aurelia held out a handkerchief and said in a standoffish tone, "I don't understand what's going on either, but you should wipe your face at once. I can hardly bear to look at you. Refrain from exposing such an embarrassing and unpleasant visage where I can see it."

The handkerchief was decorated with delicate lace and embroidery. I hesitated to take it with my wet hands. "But...I'll sully it..."

“Do you honestly believe me to be so frugal with this manner of handkerchief? Don’t lower me to your level. I have more handkerchiefs than I can count, and I’m hardly going to miss this one. Sully it if you must!”

She thrust it upon me almost as if throwing it away. Lord Simeon intercepted it first and wiped my tears.

The boat slowly approached the wharf. I saw now that the ones waiting at the top of the staircase were Ambassador Nigel’s valet and Lady Aurelia’s maid.

The late afternoon wind chilled my soaked body, and when I thought about what was to come, I felt as though my chest was being crushed. Still, though I felt scared and beaten down, it heartened me to know that I had kind people lending me their support and encouragement.

Chapter Seven

Supported by Lord Simeon, I made my way up the staircase, where a familiar face offered me a large towel. “Here you go, my lady.” It was Arthur, a teenage boy with black hair who served, today as ever, in the role of Ambassador Nigel’s valet.

“So well prepared!” said Ambassador Nigel, sounding rather impressed, as he climbed the steps behind us.

Arthur remained expressionless as usual. He curtly replied to his master, “It seemed only prudent to have a towel on hand while you were boating. You do have a tendency to engage in practical jokes, master.”

“Yes, well,” said the ambassador. “I’m happy to have such a fine valet.”

Arthur bowed and retreated.

Lady Aurelia strode past me and quickly reached her lady’s maid. “You brought refreshments, did you not? Serve something that will warm the body. Serve it to Lord Simeon, I mean! That girl can have some as an afterthought. *Only* as an afterthought!”

“Yes, understood. As an afterthought. Shall I go to that house and ask if I can borrow their fire? I’ll prepare a large portion of mulled wine, as quickly as I can.”

The maid seemed accustomed to her mistress’s personality. She retrieved a basket from a nearby carriage and ran over to the nearest house.

Arthur brought Lord Simeon’s jacket, shoes and glasses over to him. “It was presumptuous of me, but I collected these for you.”

“Thank you,” Lord Simeon replied. “It’s much appreciated.”

It seemed that before jumping into the river, he had taken off some of his clothes and neatly left his glasses behind as well—a level-headed approach that was typical of him. Lord Simeon put on only his glasses and shoes, leaving his

jacket for the moment.

I took off my own shoes and poured the water out of them. I also wrung out my skirt several times; it had become uncomfortably scrunched up over my legs. When I looked down, water trickled down from my hair as well. I was certain I looked thoroughly unpardonable.

Though Lord Simeon was also soaked, he was still beautiful. In fact, while wet he exuded a strange allure. Amongst this mixed group, I alone was a shabby wet rat. Normally I'd be able to laugh at that and use it as fuel for my novels, but at this juncture I just couldn't conjure up my usual enthusiasm.

After I spent a while wringing out my hair, Lord Simeon wiped it with the towel. He dried off my neck as well, and the chill began to subside. I wrung the towel out several times to try and dry my body as best I could. Ambassador Nigel said it was fine to go home with his jacket on, so I gratefully borrowed it, and layered Lord Simeon's on top of that as well.

The ambassador took Lady Aurelia's hand and gave it an elegant kiss. "Miss Aurelia, I must apologize, but for today I'd like to concentrate on helping these two get home. Let's meet again another day."

Lady Aurelia jerked her chin to the side haughtily. "Invite me to join you for a different activity next time. Somewhere that I'm unlikely to have to suffer seeing someone soaked to the bone."

"How about we go on a long ride?" he suggested. "We could enjoy a picnic together."

"Yes, that would be lovely." Then she turned to me. "But *you* had better not suddenly appear out of the woods being chased by a bear!"

I replied, "If I do, I hope you'll join me in running away from it, Lady Aurelia."

"Why must I endure being chased by the bear as well!?"

"Though personally," I said, "I'd rather encounter a majestic black panther than a bear."

"A black panther?" She furrowed her brow. "Are they carnivores or herbivores?"

“Very enthusiastic carnivores. They are in the cat family, after all.”

“Then we’ll be devoured either way!” she cried.

“You’ll find no such thing anywhere near here,” Lord Simeon interrupted with a deadpan expression. “Bears or black panthers.”

That ended our exchange, but thanks to Lady Aurelia and her usual level of zeal and passion, my good cheer had returned to a certain extent.

I couldn’t let myself feel miserable forever. I had to think more actively about what to do next. *Although there really isn’t much I can do other than apologize to the duke, and...oh dear, now I’m miserable again.*

I let out an unintentional sigh just as the sound of footsteps approached. I turned my head thinking it was slightly soon for Lady Aurelia’s maid to have returned. It was a man approaching us. I let out a surprised exclamation, while Lord Simeon immediately stepped forward and threw a punch.

“What!?” I cried.

Ambassador Nigel’s eyes widened in surprise as well. Lady Aurelia was stunned, her mouth gaping open.

The opponent nimbly dodged, and Lord Simeon followed up with flowing movements, repeating his attack a second time and a third.

“Wait,” I stammered, “please wait, Lord Simeon! That man is—”

But even as I tried to stop him, his assault continued at too fast a speed to even follow with my eyes. His opponent tried to take him from behind, but he struck with an elbow without even turning to look. When that, too, was avoided, he delivered a kick. Their battle for supremacy was unfolding before my eyes once again. The two of them were still an incredible sight. Despite moving so quickly without any rest, neither of them was caught off balance for a moment. They each avoided every blow by a paper-thin margin, and every counterattack was instantly delivered and dodged just as quickly. Their magnificent movements continued on like a synchronized dance.

“Listen to me! Lord Simeon, he’s—”

“I know,” said Lord Simeon, his voice frighteningly cool and level-headed

despite the ferociousness of his ongoing assault. “It’s Lutin, isn’t it?”

“Oh...” I was lost for words at him stating this so directly.

Lutin, too, raised his eyebrows in shock as he squared off against Lord Simeon. “What? How did you...?”

Lutin had not removed his disguise. Outwardly, he was still Armand. Though it had been obvious that Lord Simeon would come after him, I hadn’t expected him to figure out his identity as well.

“It’s those eyes,” said Lord Simeon. “I’d know them anywhere. Those mocking eyes, poking fun at everyone. It couldn’t be anyone but that damned common criminal.”

“Whaaat!?” I exclaimed. *He deduced it purely by looking at him!?* Admittedly, the only thing Lutin couldn’t change when he disguised himself was the color of his eyes—he had said as much—but even so, blue eyes were hardly uncommon. If Lord Simeon could see through the disguise at a single glance, that surely spoke of love rather than hate!

Or perhaps they’re natural enemies, sensing each other by instinct.

Did this mean that from the moment he held up our carriage, Lord Simeon had already deduced that this was a case related to Lutin? Now that I thought about it, he had been glaring at “Armand” quite fiercely during that whole exchange. Just as Lutin had subsequently suggested, it seemed Lord Simeon had already been able to ascertain what the circumstances were and how they related to the chain of events we’d experienced.

Lord Simeon took a large leap away from Lutin, and the latter put some distance between them as well.

Lutin whistled with faux admiration. “I suppose I should commend you, Vice Captain, though I must say it doesn’t give me much pleasure to be recognized by you.”

Ambassador Nigel appeared impressed as well. Only Lady Aurelia looked around at everyone, unable to follow what was going on. “Excuse me? Did you just say that he’s...Lutin? Lutin, the mysterious thief?”

Lutin presented himself to her with a theatrical bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Aurelia. It pains me to have to introduce myself while borrowing another man’s face, but it is nonetheless an honor to meet the famous rose princess of House Cavaignac.”

These affected words only made Lady Aurelia more astonished. “But... What!?”

Meanwhile, my eyes narrowed. *Is this burglar trying to court Lady Aurelia, too?*

“Don’t be jealous, Marielle,” he said. “You’re still entirely lovely even when you’re soaking wet.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m frustrated, because, as you’ve rightfully pointed out, I have been through rather a distressing experience today. And whose fault would you say that is?”

“It’s you that decided to run. Your intention of escaping via the river, where we’d be unable to chase you, was a sensible one, but I became fearful that you might not be able to steer the boat, so I decided to come after you.”

Lord Simeon stood between me and Lutin. “A fine thing for you to say when it was you that created the very situation she had to run from. Admit your own guilt.” Lord Simeon’s voice was tinged with anger, and he once again exuded murderous intent. He had a fearsome air about him, as though he could leap into action at any second.

I grasped on to his shirt. “Admittedly, he’s given me plenty of cause for complaint today—I could go on at him for hours—but he was driven by circumstances of his own. I think it would be better to discuss it all calmly.”

“Yes, I quite agree,” Lord Simeon replied. “Once I’ve beaten him soundly and restrained him, I’ll be glad to let him explain everything.”

“I said we should *discuss* it, not that you should interrogate him! I’d enjoy witnessing that, but now is not the time.”

“But he’s the cause of all this nonsense, is he not? He’s the culprit—the one who put you in danger. The one who made you cry.”

Good heavens, this again! I knew it. I knew crying in front of Lord Simeon was a poor choice.

It would have angered him at the best of times, but when Lutin was responsible, all sense that things might be resolved peacefully was lost. I understood very well why he had become so outraged. “No, there’s more to it than—wait!”

Even as I spoke, Lord Simeon leapt forward without looking back at me. Lutin moved to strike back as well, full of vigor and with a dangerous look on his face.

I cowered, fearing that this spectacle of the two charging toward each other would have a horrible end to it. But at that very moment, the two of them were repelled backwards.

“Ngh!” groaned Lord Simeon, staggering backward as he clutched his stomach.

“Argh!” grunted Lutin, similarly clutching his shoulder.

Between them stood Ambassador Nigel. “In general I’m happy to let the two rivals for a lady’s love punch each other until their feelings are resolved, but there is such a thing as a time and a place. If you behave so abhorrently in front of the young lady in question, won’t you scare her off?”

He spun the cane in his hand. I was familiar with this cane—there was more to it than met the eye. Inside was a hidden blade.

But what had he just done with the cane? Had he managed to intervene before their blows met? It had all happened so quickly, I couldn’t quite understand. By the time my eyes caught up, Lord Simeon and Lutin had moved apart from one another.

Ambassador Nigel is a descendant of the Burly Earldom, after all. Perhaps he’s even stronger than Lord Simeon! Though he hardly shows it, acting like such a debaucher that he’s the bane of his underlings’ existence.

“You become awfully intense when your fiancée is involved,” he said, facing Lord Simeon with an exasperated smile. “It’s a scary thing when a serious man falls madly in love.”

Lord Simeon adjusted his glasses and looked away. Lutin also shrugged his shoulders in his usual jovial manner, before screwing up his face and saying, “Ow, ow, ow...”

Even if there was no sense of cordiality between them, for now at least the murderous intent had vanished. I put a hand on my chest in relief.

“Excuse me...” came a hesitant voice. While everyone stood in silence, Lady Aurelia’s maid had returned. Bewildered though she was by the strange atmosphere, she politely offered a steaming cup to Lord Simeon. “I’ve brought the mulled wine.”

Lord Simeon shook his head. “Apologies after all the trouble you’ve gone to, but I’ll refrain. I’ve a need to cool my head somewhat, you see.”

He let out a deep sigh, and made an effort to calm down his disarrayed emotions. The maid did not say anything; she simply withdrew from Lord Simeon and came over to me instead.

“Thank you,” I said, gratefully accepting it. The wine was delightfully warm and flavored with sugar and spices. Amid the gentle sweetness was some element that made the mouth tingle, and it heated my cold body most comfortably.

Once I had enjoyed a second cup, Lady Aurelia turned to the ambassador. “It seems best that we part ways. I shall take my leave now.”

“Apologies that I won’t be able to see you home,” he replied. “I’ll make it up to you next time.”

“I look forward to it. And *you*.” She glared at me once more. “I don’t know much about what’s happened to you, but isn’t your wedding in two days? Whatever mess you’re involved in, clean it up quickly.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your help.”

“Hmph!”

Lady Aurelia turned her face away sharply and departed. Though I’ve no doubt she was intensely curious, she had chosen to leave us so that we could speak more comfortably, rather than attempting to pry. She wasn’t purely

villainous, after all, but a first-rate noblewoman. It was such a shame that she didn't fall within Prince Severin's tastes. She would definitely have made a fine crown princess and, ultimately, queen.

"Now then," said Ambassador Nigel. "We mustn't stand here by the river forever. The wind is rather chilly. Whose house shall we head towards?"

He looked at both me and Lord Simeon. Before I could answer, Lord Simeon expressed that he would like me to join him at House Flaubert's residence. "I can't let you go home in such a state," he explained. "Besides, we have matters to discuss."

"I don't especially mind," I said.

"Very well then. Arthur, call the carriage," said Ambassador Nigel with a nod to his valet.

But Lutin interrupted. "I have their carriage. I've left it nearby, so I'll bring it over."

He turned and walked off without even waiting for an answer. As I watched him go, another question occurred to me. "Lord Simeon, what happened to Claude? Is he all right? And Joseph?"

"I left them in the police's care when I brought in the criminals. I told Joseph to use a fiacre to get home, so I expect he'll have gone ahead."

"I have to tell Claude that I lost the ring as well," I lamented.

"Let's get in touch with him after we arrive home," said Lord Simeon. "You don't need to worry. Focus on resting for now."

I waited for the carriage with Lord Simeon's arm wrapped around my shoulders. Ambassador Nigel stood and waited with us, with a face that suggested this was a matter of course.

Lord Simeon turned to him. "We'll be traveling in our own carriage, it seems. You may feel free to go home."

"I'd like to hear the story first," the ambassador replied. "There seemed to be more behind your altercation just now than a mere clash of rivals in love. It has the whiff of an international incident about it. If Lavia and Lagrange are at

loggerheads, that's not something I can ignore as a representative of Easdale."

Though Lord Simeon seemed to have been trying to drive him away, the ambassador flatly rejected his efforts. Lord Simeon sighed and did not say anything further. However, this did suggest that my suspicions earlier had been mere overthinking. Ambassador Nigel did not know anything about the situation. He had neither been colluding with Lutin nor participating in the Easdale faction's plot.

Perhaps this whole sequence of events had made me overly suspicious. Reassured, I let the tension drain from my shoulders.

I was also fairly sure that Ambassador Nigel would not start working against us once he did learn the details of the case. That baron's plan was clearly a nefarious one, so he would undoubtedly insist that Easdale as a nation had nothing to do with it. I was sure I had nothing to worry about. However, having one more curious onlooker did make me a tiny bit self-conscious.

I heard the rattle of an approaching carriage as Lutin returned. There was no other driver, so I suddenly wondered if he intended to drive us to the Flaubert residence himself. Looking at Lutin as he skillfully handled the horse, I suddenly realized there was something different about him now, and I stared with somewhat mixed feelings. Lord Simeon, having apparently realized the same thing, looked at Lutin with a look of great displeasure as well.

When we arrived, we were greeted by the butler, who was taken aback by what a horrifying state we were in. He ordered a maid to draw a bath immediately.

Word of our arrival spread quickly, and one by one the members of Lord Simeon's family showed their faces.

"Simeon!?" said Lord Adrien, his younger brother, in stunned amazement. "What on earth has happened to you!?"

From behind him came the youngest of the three brothers, Lord Noel. "Heavens, you two are in quite a state. You really shouldn't be getting wet together before your wedding."



“Noel, where did you learn such a vulgar euphemism?”

Lord Simeon spoke in a voice so thunderously deep it sounded as though it came from the very depths of the earth. Lord Noel immediately drew back. Not entirely understanding, I cocked my head. “What he said just now... Was it somehow vulgar?”

Lord Simeon hesitated. “No, it was nothing.”

In that moment when Lord Simeon’s attention was distracted, Lord Noel ran and hid behind Lord Adrien with a grateful look toward me. I was still musing over how that phrase might have been vulgar when Lord Simeon’s mother arrived.

“You two... Didn’t you go out simply to pick up the rings? How in the world did you end up like that?” Youthful and beautiful as ever, Countess Estelle took in our appearance with an appalled expression. “Your wedding is in two days! This is hardly the time for foolish games!”

“Mother, I can assure you, no games were—”

“It’s one thing for Simeon to end up like that, but you, Marielle? As I’ve told you many times, a lady is supposed to be beautiful and elegant at all times! You’re not a child anymore. You must remember your etiquette!”

“Sorry,” I uttered vaguely.

“Hold on, dear,” said the earl as he approached. “I’m sure this happened due to some circumstances beyond their control. It’s not yet warm enough to be playing in the water, so I doubt they look like this because they’ve been frolicking.”

Unlike his sons, Earl Maximilian was a slender academic type. He turned his attention toward the two men standing behind us.

“And we have guests. Welcome, Ambassador Nigel. I understand that you were of great help to my sons recently. And who’s this?”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Earl Flaubert,” Lutin replied in a refined manner. “Please forgive the sudden intrusion. I am Emidio Cialdini of Lavia.”

Without us noticing, he had some point transformed back into the youthful and handsome young man whose short black hair bounced cheerfully at the ends. Earlier, he had removed his disguise completely before bringing the carriage over. Countess Estelle showed a favorable reaction to his exuberant handsomeness, while Earl Maximilian, Lord Adrien and Lord Noel looked rather bemused.

“What an unusual gathering,” said the earl with a look at Lord Simeon. “How unexpected to have guests from both Lavia and Easdale at the same time.”

Lord Simeon shook his head. “I shall explain later. Before that, we need to discuss some matters amongst ourselves.”

“Ah, of course. And you must also change your clothes, I suppose. Please excuse us. Matthias, I ask you to take care of the guests.”

“Very good, my lord,” the butler replied.

Though the earl presented an air of nonchalance, it was clear he had instantly understood that something serious was going on, and thus had withdrawn his inquiry. He delivered a casual goodbye to Lutin and Ambassador Nigel, then left with his wife. This was typically considerate behavior from Lord Simeon’s parents.

Lord Adrien appeared to wish to stay behind—he always wanted to cling to Lord Simeon—but Countess Estelle pulled him away by the ear. Lord Noel, too, tried to cunningly stay put, but he ran off after one glare from Lord Simeon.

“Your parents are awfully young,” said Ambassador Nigel admiringly once they were safely out of earshot. “When did they have you?”

At a glance, one might assume the earl and countess were around forty, or even younger.

Lord Simeon replied bluntly, “They have young faces and dress younger than their ages. That’s all.”

“So the Vice Captain resembles his mother,” said Lutin, turning to look at me. “It makes me want to see your family as well, Marielle.”

“Mine is nothing to speak of. The most ordinary family in the world.”

My mother looked entirely as you'd expect for her age, and my father had a very slightly protruding belly. My older brother, with his unkempt hair and dark-rimmed glasses, also had an unfashionable air about him. One might say I was not the only plain one in the family.

"This way, my lady," said the maid who had rushed off to prepare everything in a hurry, and had now returned. I was separated from Lord Simeon and the others and led to a guest suite on the second floor.

My soaked dress clung to my body so awkwardly that it was difficult to remove. It took two people to help me undress. The bathtub was already full of hot water; I got in, and gradually the servants added more boiling water to increase the temperature. However, even a moderate temperature felt wonderful on my chilled body, and I was grateful for it.

"You're certain it isn't too cold?" a servant asked.

"It's perfect, thank you."

As my body warmed up, the tension flowed out of me. The servants also washed my hair, which smelled of the river. Once it was clean, I felt very keenly that I had returned to safety and security. The business of the rings and the necklace was still not resolved, but I had escaped from my predicament, and for that I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. For a time, I'd really feared what might happen. It had been a hectic and bewildering day where far too much had happened.

I leaned back in the bath and stared up at the ceiling. *I don't know what we'll do about the rings. Maybe there really is no alternative but to use substitutes for the ceremony?*

That would be a terrible shame, I felt, but there wasn't much to be done about it. And in the end, it was a problem for us alone, and would be resolved by having new ones made afterwards. It would be all right.

The bigger problem was Duke Silvestre's ring. Given how things had turned out, it would be impossible to hide our involvement now. It was upsetting to even think about having to ask his forgiveness when there was no hope of ever repaying the three million algiers.

The sky outside the window was turning red already. It would soon be time for dinner. My stomach was rumbling again, but if I ate now, I feared I would soon fall asleep. My recent lack of sleep combined with today's troubles had left me remarkably drowsy. I felt as though only my empty stomach was keeping me awake. *Could I decline to eat dinner, perhaps? But that would be tragic as well. I really am hungry.*

For now I was sufficiently clean and relaxed, so I got out of the bath. Lord Simeon would no doubt have returned to the others once he was finished changing, so I wished to get back to them quickly as well, but the servants were so thorough in their treatment of me that I couldn't make them dress me just yet.

"No need to fuss over me," I told them. "I'm in rather a hurry, so please bring me a change of clothes."

"But your hair isn't dry yet."

I was seated in a chair wearing only a robe while they stood behind me drying my hair. I said it was fine for me as long as it wasn't literally dripping, but they shook their heads and insisted that this was not acceptable.

"But I have to talk to the others. I can't be too late."

"How many times must I tell you?" came a voice like a slap to the face.

I turned around in surprise. "Countess Estelle!"

She stepped through the doorway. "Do you intend to expose yourself with wet hair in front of the gentlemen? I wonder, do you fully understand the significance of that?"

Countess Estelle came nearer, with a smile that was somehow terrifying. I froze as she stroked my cheek with her closed fan. Her menacing force was just what one would expect from Lord Simeon's mother.

"W-w-well, I..."

"My word, you really are a child through and through." She sighed wearily. "The only one who should see you in a slovenly state with wet hair after getting out of the bath, or disheveled hair after waking up, is your husband. It is

essentially an act of seduction, after all.”

“Even hair can be used for seduction?”

“Absolutely. If something that’s normally in perfect order is in disarray, it drives a gentleman wild. It would be totally inappropriate to recklessly put yourself on display like that! Though if it’s only to Simeon, then it’s perfectly all right, you understand? With him, you should be as provocative as possible and seduce him as thoroughly as you can.”

Feeling my cheeks grow hot, I nodded several times. *Y-y-yes, I see, so that’s the way gentlemen see such things. I’ve learned a valuable tip about the effectiveness of hair. I’ll definitely use that in my next book! I’ll include a scene with a slight hint of sensuality and really thrill my readers!*

“Are you listening?” said Countess Estelle. “It’s important that you understand this. Well, once you’re married I expect you’ll understand a little too well for comfort, but Simeon will be suffering alongside you, and— Hold on. What is that bruise!? How have you let that happen just before the ceremony!?”

“Oh, well, you see—”

“And when I look closely, you have dark circles under your eyes. Your skincare regimen has been severely lacking. I can scarcely believe it! As a bride, you’re supposed to present yourself in the most beautiful light, with your whole body polished to perfection for the big day. Why are you so worn and ragged!?”

It was because I had needed to work myself to the bone to submit my manuscript before the honeymoon. But I did not offer that as an excuse, and simply accepted her lengthy diatribe about skincare. At this rate, it looked as though I would be waylaid by Countess Estelle for quite some time. She continued scolding me until my hair was fully dried, and then insisted that I receive some skin treatments as well. As this went on, the sky outside turned pitch black. By the end I felt so hungry I might die, and I headed to the dining room without any thought of bowing out of dinner.

“Apologies for being so late,” I said, entering with an awkward expectation that I had made everyone wait for me, but Lutin and Ambassador Nigel were not even there. Aside from Lord Simeon there was only one other person present, sitting with his back to me, and even without my glasses on I could tell

it was someone else.

“Oh. Where did those two go?”

“They went home not too long ago,” Lord Simeon replied. “I wouldn’t mind entertaining Ambassador Nigel, but I don’t feel any particular obligation to invite Lutin to stay for dinner.”

He said those last words rather coldly, then took my hand. I balked and asked if he had really chased him away for a reason as flimsy as that, but his broad shoulders shrugged.

“We had also finished our discussion. He has his own business to deal with. He must reunite with the band of criminals he abandoned, and give them some rather careful guidance, it seems.”

“Ah yes, the baron and his men.”

Escorted by Lord Simeon, I made my way to the table. Even without my glasses I wasn’t so hindered that I couldn’t walk, but it nonetheless made me uncomfortable that the world around me was so vague. But in spite of my more limited awareness, I managed to cautiously avoid getting too close to the other guest, instead fleeing to the other side of Lord Simeon and using him as a shield.

As I did that, a low voice said, “What the devil are you doing? Come over here.” His elegant hand beckoned me.

Clinging to Lord Simeon, I replied, “I feel too much at risk, so I’d rather not, thank you.”

The black-haired man slowly turned to face me. “At risk? From me? Poppycock.” His masculine beauty was tinged with menace, and my urge to run away grew greater still.

“Do you promise you’ll refrain from using your fists to torment me? I don’t think a prince should be raising his hand to a lady.”

“Surely you’re aware of how your own actions justify such treatment.”

“I certainly am not!”

Prince Severin stood up, and I ran even further away. At that moment, Lord

Simeon grabbed me.

“You could give him a chance to speak.”

“Let me go, I don’t want to! His Highness is so quick to punch me and grind his fists against my head. Don’t you think it’s awfully mean? Regardless of my other traits, I am the daughter of a viscount.”

“A normal viscount’s daughter wouldn’t need me to teach them what’s what!” said His Highness.

He put his hands on my head. I suspected it would be another assault, and I braced myself for that, but no pain followed. Instead he forcibly turned me around to face him, and his glaring eyes met mine at close range. “I asked Simeon if you were still safe and well after the day’s events, but I feel compelled to ask you directly. Are you truly all right?”

“Y-yes,” I replied.

“You are aware that what you did today was *fraught* with danger, yes?”

I hesitated a moment and then said, “Yes.”

His Highness sighed and released his hands. “I’ve heard all about what happened, and I must say that you displayed a perfectly respectable degree of gumption in deciding to escape by yourself. I only wish it had been accompanied by a more level-headed sort of decision-making. There are times when you must act even when all seems hopeless, and other times when it’s so impossible that you must simply surrender. You’re always eager to take action, but you must develop the ability to take stock of the situation and decide which of those is applicable. I shan’t harangue you too much further since I’m sure today’s experience has frightened you enough, but do remember that a great number of people are eager to see you walk down the aisle.”

One of his large hands kindly stroked my head. This serious warning reached me far more deeply than being harshly rebuked.

“I’m sorry,” I said after a moment.

“Yes, well, I’m glad you’re all right.”

His Highness’s expression finally softened. Regardless of how he acted

sometimes, ultimately he was a kind man. He had heard about the day's events and was worried about me.

But the warm feelings that had begun to emerge were thoroughly dashed by what he said next.

"Besides, it would be quite inconvenient for you to drown before I make any progress in wooing Miss Julianne."

"So that's what it's really about for you?" I replied, my eyes narrowing. He had thrown cold water all over the emotional reaction he had finally won from me. "Your romantic endeavors are more important than my survival?"

"They're separate matters! I understand you're filled with glee at your impending nuptials, but spare a thought for my feelings, being forced to have yours continually thrown in my face."

"Sadly, we have other priorities right now," I replied bluntly.

"Dash it all, I'm the crown prince! My struggle to find a wife should *always* be a priority!"

"My own wedding is simply too soon for me to think about that—and we're currently in a precarious position where it's hard to tell if we'll even make it safely to the wedding! If you're here, that must mean you've been informed about everything, correct? There's something I'm far more curious to hear about than your romantic difficulties, and that's the fruits of the discussion with Lutin."

His Highness and I glared at one another. Sighing, Lord Simeon interrupted, "That's enough, both of you. For now, let's eat dinner."

Lord Simeon took me by the arm and directed me toward my seat. He sat down beside me, while His Highness sullenly took his seat opposite again. "Happy little bastards," said the prince under his breath.

Even as we began to eat, he continued muttering complaints. I pretended not to notice as I took bites of the cured ham. The salty flavor was exactly what my exhausted body needed, and I enjoyed every bite.

After countless failed romances, His Highness had recently fallen in love at

first sight with Julianne, my best friend and a relative of mine. As such, he had been seeking my assistance for some time now. *I do want to offer him my support, of course, but now is not the time to become embroiled in a conversation about that!*

I ignored His Highness and turned to Lord Simeon. “So, what sort of discussion did you have with Lutin in the end?”

It felt like such a shame to have been absent from such an important meeting. Even though it probably didn’t make a difference whether I was there or not, I didn’t want to become the sort of woman who excluded myself under the logic that it was better to leave matters to the gentlemen.

“Reluctant though I was, on the whole I ended up agreeing to Lutin’s demands.” His rather disgruntled face matched his words. “After all, if it suppresses the Easdale faction, it’s largely beneficial for Lagrange. And His Highness, who was given full authority by His Majesty the King to handle this matter as he sees fit, has already agreed as well.”

“So Lutin will borrow the necklace?”

“Yes. I’ve already contacted Bijoux Carpentier to explain the situation.”

While my hair was being dried, everything had been discussed and all the arrangements had been made. *Trust Lord Simeon to be efficient.* Much as I admired him for resolving things so quickly, I did feel somewhat pathetic at having not been useful at all.

I ate the chilled pumpkin potage and had my fill of the freshly baked bread, which was beautifully aromatic.

“He should have been honest in the first place and simply asked for our help,” I said. “If he hadn’t tried to work in the shadows, he wouldn’t have caused so much trouble.”

His Highness jumped in. “The conflict between the Lagrange faction and the Easdale faction is a long and storied one, but it’s become particularly thorny since the current grand duke ascended the throne. It’s clear that the primary cause of this is the grand duke himself—his lack of authority. He’s been unable to draw together the different factions vying for power in his country to a

sufficient degree, and he's ashamed to admit that openly. He'd rather not have everybody chinwagging about it, even though we're all well aware of it."

So it's about Lavia's honor?

Lutin had said he wanted to handle it internally. It seemed it was a situation where he couldn't ask for Lagrange's assistance even though he knew it would have made his life easier.

And yet, in the end, it had all been uncovered anyway. *Poor Lutin. I'd like to go and tell him: bad deeds will always come to light, you know!*

We were served fish *poêlé* in a lemon sauce. It had a refreshing flavor, but also a richness to it. It was thoroughly delicious.

"What did Ambassador Nigel say once he learned about the incident?" I asked.

"He said it had nothing to do with Easdale and left it at that," said Lord Simeon. "If he had tried to insert himself into the matter it would only have lowered Easdale's reputation, so it's no surprise that he chose not to intervene."

This was the assurance I'd hoped for from him, that there was nothing to worry about. This was as I'd expected, but it came as a relief nonetheless.

Lord Simeon continued, "He was simply amused by it all, as ever. He has no greater part in this than to be a curious bystander, which causes no particular problem."

"Thank goodness. I'd hate to have him opposing us."

I was glad that there was no need to be on my guard against Ambassador Nigel. I thought of him as a personal friend, and if he was on the enemies' side, that would be a frightening prospect indeed. I definitely did not want to be standing against him, in more ways than one.

"Which only leaves Duke Silvestre's ring." I sighed, remembering the problem that made my head hurt most of all. I froze while cutting into a piece from the stew of beef cheek and wine.

Lord Simeon said, "You've no need to worry about that. I'll explain everything

to the duke. You can simply leave it to me.”

“I told you, I can’t accept that.” I did my best to put my emotions back in order and lifted the meat to my mouth. “I’ve been thinking about this. I’m wondering if we could make Lavia take responsibility for repaying the cost? I was the one who dropped it into the river, but it was Lavia’s conflict that led to that. Couldn’t we ask them for the three million algiers in exchange for helping them?”

I was never one to let my dejection overcome me. Though I’d lost my presence of mind earlier and had spent some time in a panic wondering what to do, I then did what people tend to do when they’re backed against a wall, and that’s come up with an idea. After a great deal of thought, my conclusion had been that we should push the debt onto the ones who had caused it in the first place.

Three million algiers was such a large sum of money that any thought of repaying it practically made my eyes jump so far out of their sockets that they went missing entirely, but in terms of a country’s expenditures, it wasn’t all that much. Lutin was backed by the Grand Duke of Lavia. He could hardly say it was impossible.

“Your Highness, Lord Simeon, please,” I continued. “Negotiate with Lutin and make him accept this condition.”

Better than me asking Lutin would be for His Highness’s authority and the Demon Vice Captain’s menacing eyes to do the convincing. But when I suggested this, the two men glanced at one another with an odd look on both of their faces.

A moment later I said, “Is it a bad idea after all?”

“Not at all,” said Lord Simeon, quickly shaking his head. “Only...”

His Highness’s shoulders shook with laughter. “You’ve become an awful lot like Simeon, haven’t you?”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“And he’s begun to take after you in his own way. Is this what happens to lovers, I wonder?” With a look of amusement, His Highness leaned over his

glass and stared at both of us. “Simeon said exactly the same thing. He said we should make Lavia take on all responsibility for compensating the duke and Bijoux Carpentier, and also told Lutin to accompany him when explaining and apologizing to the duke. It seemed Lutin had already foreseen this to a certain extent, but Simeon’s famous lack of mercy ground him down and left his face twitching. Rather a shame that you weren’t there. It’s exactly the sort of exchange you tend to thoroughly relish.”

What? Whaaaaaat? How unfair that I didn’t get to see that! It sounds like Lord Simeon was the very epitome of the brutal black-hearted scoundrel! To think that such a delicious scene unfolded while I was busy being lectured about skin treatments!

I gripped my knife and fork tightly. “Why couldn’t you have waited until I got back!?”

Lord Simeon responded to my bitter expression with a troubled look of his own. He took a sip of water and tried to downplay the situation. “Even if we had, I assure you, you didn’t miss much. It was a backroom deal, nothing more. Certainly nothing entertaining. And not something to do in front of a woman...”

“I don’t care! That alone is enough to excite me—it’s what I yearn for! Missing such an incredible scene fills me with the deepest regret. You must reenact it for me at some point!”

“Don’t make such unreasonable requests!” To silence me, Lord Simeon shoved a piece of melon into my mouth with his fork. I had no choice but to put my own cutlery down and chew on it. The servant waiting behind us quickly stepped forward to clear my plates away and put some melon on the table before me as well.

We soon finished our dinner, and afterwards I expected coffee and petit fours to be brought. Lord Simeon and His Highness weren’t fond of sweets, so they simply drank coffee. However, a pudding was placed in front of me. The circular pudding was surrounded by decorative pieces of fruit and covered with golden toffee made to look like lace. Gently balanced on top of that were delicate chocolate feathers. It was a feast for the eyes, let alone the stomach, and was surely less a petit four and more a full-sized dessert.

Lord Simeon sipped his coffee with a look of feigned ignorance while I observed him with a sideways glance. Had he asked the chef to prepare this especially to cheer me up? It was exactly like the one I had missed my chance to eat earlier that day.

I could not keep the smile from forming on my lips. I scooped up a spoonful and moved it toward Lord Simeon. "Open wide!"

"What? N-n-no, stop that!"

He tried to protest while his cheeks turned a deep shade of red. I giggled as I inched the spoon closer to his mouth.

"How can I pass up this opportunity? Now, here it comes!"

"Barbarous table manners," complained His Highness. "Eat it yourself."

"But Lord Simeon requested it specifically, did he not? He simply must try a mouthful himself. Now, open wide!"

He still recoiled somewhat, and even his ears had gone red, but Lord Simeon seemed to accept that I wouldn't back down, and reluctantly opened his mouth. The sight of the spoon in his mouth, while he looked so embarrassed, was terribly adorable. *Oh, that contrast, it's exactly what I love! The two sides of him, brutal and pure! Pure perfection!*

"How dare you," came a voice like an earthquake from the other side of the table. "Making me witness such a brazen act of romantic cavorting."

I answered with a grin, "I hope you and Julianne can feed each other one day as well. Though I must say, she's not the sort of person to do such things."

"Is this deliberate!?" he cried. "Are you purposely bullying me and deriving enjoyment from it!?"

"Oh my word, what a persecution complex you have. How unbecoming of a prince. I merely wanted to flirt with Lord Simeon a little, that's all."

"The nerve of you, admitting that so blatantly!" he shouted.

Thanks to the delicious food and the company of Lord Simeon and His Highness, my low spirits had been lifted right up. I even felt as though I'd have the courage to face Duke Silvestre. As I ate the pudding that had been so

thoughtfully prepared for me, I encouraged myself to hold on and do my best just a little while longer so that I could truly enjoy my wedding with every fiber of my being.

Chapter Eight

We saw His Highness off. I had intended to go home as well, but I lingered in the guest bedroom waiting for Lord Simeon to be ready, and this turned out to be a mistake. My body, overcome by the day's exhaustion and my recent lack of sleep, simply could not resist the temptation of the bed before me. I collapsed into it, intending to rest for just a moment—but beyond that, I have no memory. I fell fast asleep, and when I opened my eyes it was the middle of the night.

"Wh-what time is it!?" I exclaimed, leaping up with a start.

A gentle arm kept me in place. Lord Simeon was sitting next to me on the bed.

"Lord Simeon!"

"How do you feel?"

Although I had passed out on the bed without even taking off my shoes, I was now comfortably wrapped inside the covers. It seemed that, rather than waking me from my slumber, he had taken the trouble to help me sleep more comfortably. If I hadn't been wearing my corset, I suspect I'd have been content to sleep straight through until morning.

The room was dark and his figure stood out against the dim lamplight. Despite how proper he always was, never letting himself appear anything less than flawless, here in his own home he showed himself in a more relaxed state. He had taken off his jacket and was wearing only his shirt and waistcoat.

"How do I feel?" I replied, hesitating before continuing. I squirmed out from under the covers. *I hope my dress isn't too creased. Countess Estelle will scold me again.*

"You were chilled to the bone, after all. You don't seem to have a fever, but I'm still worried you might be unwell." Lord Simeon stroked my cheek with a worried expression. *So that's why he didn't wake me up.*

"I'm quite all right. Besides, I've never even caught a cold before. Not once."

“Because you’ve always been kept safe and warm in your home. I feel a need to mention this because you don’t seem to have the self-awareness to realize it on your own, but you are by no means a hardy person. You’re the same as all ladies from good houses: frail and powerless, without much physical stamina.”

“Certainly I’m weak compared to you, Lord Simeon, but I’m sure I’m stronger than the average young lady. I’m always going out into the city and walking around on my own two feet.”

“But you ride there and back in a carriage, and even walking tires you out, doesn’t it? I know from listening to you just how limited a range of activities you undertake. Your body hasn’t been tempered to any degree worth mentioning. Doesn’t your lifestyle primarily consist of sitting at a desk as you write or read books? Even when you go to a ball, you hardly even dance. You might actually be weaker than the average young lady.”

“I don’t think the average young lady would manage to stay up several nights in a row to meet a deadline.”

He paused. “If you’ve done a thing like that, it can only have compounded your exhaustion. In any case, you’ve had a challenging day. Even if you’re not ill at present, please be careful not to push yourself too far.”

While still sitting on the bed, Lord Simeon poured some water into a glass and handed it to me. I took a sip, then breathed a sigh of relief at my thirst being quenched.

“What would you like to do?” he asked. “It’s rather late, so it would be easier if you simply stayed the night, but these last days before the wedding are an important time. Perhaps it would be better if you went home to your family.”

“My family... They don’t know what happened.”

“I’ve contacted them already. I gave a basic explanation, and when I take you home I’ll apologize in person.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

Going home at this time would, honestly speaking, have been more awkward than anything else. If they’d already been informed of my whereabouts, they were probably asleep, I was sure. My parents had absolute trust in Lord

Simeon; they wouldn't be staying up worrying about me.

I decided to tell him as much. "Given the late hour, could I ask you to let me stay the night? If I go home now, I'll only wake them up. I might as well just go home in the morning."

"Returning home in the morning before we're married wouldn't be ideal for your reputation."

Even in unusual circumstances like these, he never lost his stubborn focus on such serious matters. It made me laugh very slightly. "Going home in the middle of the night would hardly be any better. Besides, there are only two days until we'll be married. Closer to one day by now, in fact. Surely there's no point in worrying about it at this stage. And honestly, I don't have the energy to go home."

"I suppose there's no helping it." Lord Simeon nodded with a half-smile.

This was the first time we had ever spoken to one another at such a late hour. It felt comfortable, being in his company in the calm and quiet of night. Given the time, I should really have said good night to him and gone back to sleep, but it seemed a shame to part so soon. I wanted to extend our time together, even if only slightly.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" I asked him. "Can we consider the business with the necklace resolved for the time being? The rest is up to Lutin and the Grand Duke of Lavia."

"Yes, indeed. I don't expect us to be concerned with it any further."

"Then all that's left is...the explanation and apology to Duke Silvestre."

I remembered as I said the words, and my spirits sank. Despite how hard I had fought to cheer myself up, I couldn't keep this matter from interfering with my mood. However, I could not run away from it either. "Tomorrow is the last day before the wedding, and I don't want to be facing the ceremony with a problem still lingering. I want to feel nothing but joy on our big day." And, aside from that, it only seemed right to deliver the apology as soon as possible. "That said, I do wonder if the duke will permit such a sudden visit."

Lord Simeon nodded again. "I've already contacted the duke as well. He has

agreed to meet tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh...”

He really was an exceptionally efficient person. To think he had done all that while I was having my hair dried! Well, you’ve heard me go on about that enough times.

I felt uncomfortably aware of how different we were. There was a difference in age and life experience, of course, but even aside from that, I simply couldn’t measure up to Lord Simeon. I appreciated his dependability, but I felt so much frustration at my own worthlessness.

“I’m sorry to have left you to take care of it all,” I told him.

“Honestly, you needn’t worry. Didn’t I tell you to leave it to me? If possible, I’d also like to go on my own tomorrow, but...”

I shook my head firmly. “No, I must go. I have to apologize to him myself.”

“You can be awfully stubborn.”

“That’s rich coming from you, Lord Simeon.”

He took on a look of exasperation, and for a brief moment we glared at each other. Then we both sighed at the same time.

“I’d like to explain it all from the perspective that you were a victim who got caught up in the situation against your will,” said Lord Simeon. “It’s better to avoid admitting any guilt on our part. If we carelessly let him see a weak point, there’s a risk that he’ll target that and start making unreasonable demands. We must make it absolutely clear that all the blame belongs to Lavia. I intend to stress that firmly.”

“I can’t say I disagree. Only, a scenario where I don’t apologize is practically inconceivable. Regardless of where the fault lies, a polite apology is the logical move.”

“Yes, that’s true, but—”

“Anyone, not only Duke Silvestre, would take offense if I failed to show my face to apologize in person and left it to others instead. I think that would actually complicate matters further.”

“But we don’t have to explain every single detail of what occurred. We can ambiguously suggest that the ring was lost in an unforeseen accident, and thus hide your involvement.”

“That’s rather unlike you, Lord Simeon. What happens if you haphazardly cover up the truth, then he discovers the details later? You’ll be walking on thin ice with the duke.”

He had nothing to say to that.

“I’ll go too,” I insisted. “Please, take me with you tomorrow.”

The more determined one is in trying to hide something, the more likely it is to come to light. Lady Aurelia had been a witness to the day’s events, and there could have been any number of other people in the vicinity who saw what happened. Even Ambassador Nigel couldn’t necessarily be trusted to keep the secret. We couldn’t hope to conceal the truth forever.

There was no way to resolve this without me making an appearance. If I didn’t go, that in itself would surely be seen by the duke as a weakness for him to take advantage of.

Faced with my obstinacy, it looked as though Lord Simeon was about to start despairing, but instead a bitter smile appeared on his pretty face. With a gentle gaze, he reached out and caressed my head. “The truth is, the duke also *told* me to bring you. I had intended to refuse on some pretext or other, but I should have known you wouldn’t agree to that.”

So the duke had beaten him to the punch. I nodded vigorously. “If he insisted upon it, then all the more reason not to back down. Even you must understand that I have to be there.”

Lord Simeon let out a sigh and moved over to sit right beside me. “I was hoping to bury my head in the sand. Why do you have to be sensible all of a sudden in a situation like this.”

“I’d say I’m sensible all the time, thank you very much.”

“Would you? I invite you to reflect upon your usual behavior.”

“I admit that I occasionally go into a fangirl frenzy or two, but I’m sensible

most of the time. I'm an unassuming person who blends into the background."

"You'd be more accurately described as a cat hiding its claws. As soon as you get close to people, your real personality comes to the fore."

"That's no more true for me than for anyone else."

My sulking only made Lord Simeon's smile grow. He put his steadfast arms around me. "I'm well aware that if we refused his request for you to attend, that would also be a sign of weakness. Still, even knowing that, I didn't want to bring you into the duke's presence. I was afraid that something might happen to you again. I didn't want to put you in any further danger." I nestled against his chest and felt his hot breath as he whispered into my ear. "I'm incredibly happy simply to be able to sit here and talk to you now. How worthless I felt, watching you be spirited away before my eyes and being unable to stop it. Then, when I finally found you, you were in critical condition—barely even alive."

I swallowed. "I can only apologize for the trouble I caused you."

"But now you're here, and you're in good health. That makes me happy...so very happy. I was terrified, deep in my soul, that I might lose you. I don't wish to feel that way ever again. Please, promise me never to do anything as dangerous as that ever again. Don't force yourself to do the impossible. If anything happens, let me take care of it."

His arms grew tighter around me. He pressed his cheek against my hair, snuggling up against me as though he was confirming my very existence with his whole body. My own feelings were stirred up fiercely, and I put my arms around him as well, as firmly as I could, as if to tell him, *Yes, I'm here. It's all right. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to live on together with you.*

"I promise," I told him. "I won't leave you behind, no matter what. I, Marielle, will be by your side forever."

I love him. I love him from the bottom of my heart. My certainty was unwavering. Lord Simeon was indeed the only one I felt this way about. It was so clear. In this moment that we could feel each other's body heat, I was happier than anything and overcome by the sense of how dear he was to me. Nothing compared to this supreme bliss.

Our lips came together naturally, with no sense that one or the other had initiated it. They touched immediately since my glasses weren't there to get in the way as usual. Lord Simeon's glasses brushed against my skin on occasion, but I felt just a momentary hint of cold, and I was so consumed by the endless waves of contentment and passion that nothing else mattered.

We kissed each other again and again—yearning for each other, demanding each other. Lord Simeon's lips touched on my cheeks and eyelids as well. The soft heat brushed against my skin and intoxicated me. A deep and passionate feeling welled up from deep inside me. It made my chest heave up and down. When I exhaled, it was not only breath that flowed out, but desire. Lord Simeon's arms came for me even more strongly.

Suddenly we found we had fallen over, and we embraced one another while lying horizontal, both thoroughly enraptured. He kissed my ear, then the nape of my neck. He softly traced my skin with his lips, and I writhed in a pleasant and ticklish agony.



Before I knew it, my breath became ragged. I was panting audibly. A large hand roamed around my back, stroking up from my hips, making my body tremble furiously. I felt a tiny hint of fear at this unfamiliar feeling, but it was indescribably comfortable, and I began to want it more and more. His blond head moved down to my clavicle; he kissed me there, then buried his head in the region of my chest. I embraced his head with both hands.

But despite how perfect it felt, I was struck with a sense of great impatience. I needed more, and I needed it urgently.

“Lord Simeon...”

In the moment that I called him his name, Lord Simeon’s whole body shook violently.

In one sudden motion, he sat up, moving away from me with surprising vigor. When I opened my eyes, feeling lonely now that his warmth was gone, the face I saw nearby was aghast.

He put both hands firmly on the bed and looked down, not saying a word.

“Lord Simeon?” I asked, wondering what was wrong.

He trembled again, and drew away sharply.

“Lord Simeon? Is something the matter?”

“N-n-no... It’s not... I... I’m...s-sorry...!”

He turned to face away from me. Longing for the warmth I’d been surrounded by until mere moments ago, I nestled up to his back. “What’s wrong? Did I do something to spoil the mood?”

“No, it’s not that. Not that at all. Only...could you please keep some distance? I’d prefer you not to cling to me like this.”

Being told that only made me yearn for him more. “You don’t like it when I get close to you?”

“That’s not what I mean! It’s having something of an...unintended effect, that’s all. I’m begging you, please allow some distance.” He spoke as if it were a matter of life or death, and curled up his body as if trying to escape from me.

How odd to see Lord Simeon, of all people, behaving this way! Despite my shock and curiosity as to what was going on, being barred from touching him only made me long for him even more.

“Lord Simeon, if you’re really not annoyed with me, can you please at least show me your face?”

“Please,” he replied haltingly, “just allow me a moment. I promise you, it is absolutely not your fault. I have to...cool my head slightly. That’s all.”

“Are you unwell?”

Now that I thought about it, Lord Simeon, too, had plunged into the river and gotten soaked. He might not have noticed because he’d leapt into action so dynamically, but it was possible he had caught a cold. While I had, intentionally or otherwise, given myself time to recover, he had spent his evening talking to various people and making all sorts of preparations. He hadn’t had any time to regain his strength, so it wouldn’t be odd at all if he had a fever or some such.

Having finally realized this, I began to worry. “Shall I call someone?”

“No, no, no! It’s quite all right. I’m fine. Full of vim and vigor. Perhaps *too* much vim and vigor! One might say that’s the problem!”

I tried to slip past him and slide down from the bed, but he grabbed my arm. All the while, he cast his head downward, avoiding my gaze. It was hard to accept that there was nothing wrong with him. I began to grow even more anxious. If Lord Simeon had lost his composure to such an extent, there had to be a good reason. The warmth emanating from his hand where it met my arm was hot indeed. I began to suspect that he might be ill after all.

Still hanging his head, Lord Simeon started muttering to himself. Careful not to get too close, I brought my ear slightly nearer to make out his words.

“Two more days, two more days, two more days...”

Excuse me? I furrowed my brow at these words that he was repeating like a mantra. *Actually it’s closer to one day at this point, but...why is he talking about the number of days left until the wedding?*

I cocked my head. If it wasn’t that I had clumsily spoiled the mood or that he

had become ill, what else could it be, I wondered? This situation felt somehow familiar to me, and when I dug through my memories to try and recall what it reminded me of, I suddenly clapped my hands.

That's it! The light he had in his eyes before... It was just like that of the man and woman I saw embracing one another in bed! Those two had been far more immodest—they were half naked, with their remaining clothes in disarray—but the circumstances were otherwise identical. *Yes! It must be THAT sort of situation!* It had happened so naturally, I didn't even realize it had begun.

I enthusiastically hugged him from behind. "Lord Simeon!"

Lord Simeon made a sound of alarm that I had never heard from him before. He leapt up as if to escape, but I held on tightly, refusing to let him go.

"Lord Simeon, let's keep going!"

"What!?"

"I'm sorry I didn't realize, but that's how babies are made, isn't it? It's absolutely no problem—I'm very enthusiastic—so we should definitely keep going!"

At last he turned around. "It's a very big problem indeed! How can you be so crude!?" Even in the dim light I could tell that he had turned bright red, but there was anger on his face, too, as he scolded me. "Don't blurt out such vulgarities!"

"And just what is so vulgar about it? Isn't it the most important duty of a husband and wife? I've heard that once I marry into the family, the greatest demand placed upon me will be to give birth to an heir."

"But we are not yet husband and wife! We should talk about it after we're married!"

"It's barely more than a day away. We're essentially married already, aren't we? We needn't prolong the matter unnecessarily at the eleventh hour."

"Quite the contrary! Are you suggesting that we cannot endure just one more day!? After all this time spent resisting, maintaining standards of decency, don't start spouting words that will ruin it all at this late stage!"

“But...it felt so good just now. I was so happy. I want more.”

“And in two days, I’ll give you more of it than you could ever want! I hope you remember what you just said when the time comes!”

Lord Simeon forcefully pushed me back, stood up and sped away. Ignoring my pleas for him to stop, he rapidly walked over to the door. However, the moment he tried the door handle, he became incensed. “Has everyone in this house gone mad!? Open the door at once!”

But the furniture Countess Estelle had ordered to be piled up outside the door was not removed, and ultimately Lord Simeon was forced to escape via the window in order to uphold his principles.

Chapter Nine

The day after I lived through heaven and hell, I went home briefly to get myself ready, then left again shortly after midday. My family saw me off with looks of astonishment and resignation, and I set off to meet Duke Silvestre with Lord Simeon.

Along the way, we reunited with Lutin—and he was not alone.

“You appear to be in good health,” said Ambassador Nigel, standing beside Lutin with a nonchalant expression. His honey-colored hair glistened in the sun as always. “I’m relieved that you didn’t catch a cold.”

“Oh, what are you doing here?” I asked as I stepped down from the carriage.

The ambassador came closer, smiling. “I’m led by curiosity, I suppose. If I ended my involvement without seeing what happened next, I’d never stop wondering. I’d like to accompany you until the matter is concluded.”

“So you’re essentially a sightseer?”

“No need for quite such a look of distaste. If only men were involved then I’d simply leave them to their own devices, but when a young lady is in trouble, I feel compelled to lend my aid. Who knows, perhaps if you bring me along, I’ll come in handy.”

“If we don’t bring you along, you’ll follow us anyway, won’t you?”

Exasperated, I shook my head. His staff would be weeping again. *Does he ever take his job seriously, even for a single day?*

He gently lifted my chin with a single lustrous finger. Then he brought his face closer and peered at me. “Hmm, the dark circles under your eyes have disappeared. It seems you got plenty of rest last night. That does alleviate my worries somewhat.”

“Do you have to notice such fine details?”

“If I see a young lady with dark circles under her eyes, I’ll inevitably wonder

what happened. It makes me concerned as to why.”

“I’ve been rather busy, so I stayed up all night for two nights in a row.”

“Two nights in a row? Ah, youth. An old timer like me can’t engage in such behavior anymore.”

Lord Simeon knocked away his hand. “Come with us if you must, but kindly refrain from treating my fiancée with such insolence.”

Ambassador Nigel looked shocked. “You needn’t start protesting over something so small. He’s the one you should be reining in, surely?” He gestured toward Lutin with his head.

“‘Reining in’ is not sufficient in his case,” Lord Simeon replied. “He requires extermination.”

Lutin interjected, “As I recall, Vice Captain, you’re the one who told me to come. Exterminating me would be rather inconvenient for you, I believe.”

I left the gentlemen alone to their friendly exchange of greetings and walked over to the group of servants. “Good day, Arthur. Thank you for your help yesterday.”

The black-haired boy bowed politely. “I’m glad that you’re unharmed.”

“I might not be if you hadn’t been ready with a towel. And Dario, it’s good to see you again, too.”

Standing beside Arthur, and in stark contrast to the boy’s small frame, was a tall and exceptionally brawny man with a strikingly beautiful face. He maintained a stoic expression and replied with only a slight nod of his blond head. Or so I thought—but a moment later, he abruptly swung his arms into a pose that displayed all the glory of his physique.

“Your muscles look as spectacular as ever,” I said. “I see you’re ready for whatever happens.”

His white cheeks, like those of a statue, flushed faintly. I applauded to show my admiration as he struck another pose.

Lord Simeon cradled his head in his hands. “What sort of a greeting is that supposed to be?”

Lutin, too, wore a slightly strained smile. “He must be quite taken with her. It’s exceptionally rare for him to behave like this.”

“Even his subordinate gets on well with her?” said Ambassador Nigel. “It must be a struggle for your fiancée to be so popular, Vice Captain.”

Responding to the ambassador’s teasing with only a scowl, Lord Simeon ushered me back into the carriage. Lutin sneakily tried to board our carriage as well, but Lord Simeon shut the door in his face and told the driver to set off right away.

We set off in our two separate carriages. Leaving the suburbs, we soon entered the more built-up area of the city, where we stopped briefly in front of Bijoux Carpentier. Claude and his father Valery joined us, creating a procession of three carriages. The father and son appeared very relieved to know that Lavia would accept responsibility for reimbursing the duke, but even so, a fair measure of apprehension remained.

I felt much the same. When I thought about the disagreeable personality of the man we were about to meet, I could not fight my anxiety. It was impossible to know how he would react.

“I’d feel far more reassured if His Highness had joined us rather than Ambassador Nigel,” I complained idly inside the carriage, where Lord Simeon and I were alone. I had hoped His Highness would be able to come, but his day was packed full of meetings from morning till night. I knew that this was to allow him time to attend our wedding the following day, but a selfish part of me still wished he could have done both.

Just before leaving the night before, His Highness had said, “Even Duke Silvestre is not entirely beastly. If you explain everything properly, I’m sure he’ll understand...probably...I hope. In any case, if it really becomes too difficult for you to manage on your own, then call on me. I’ll find some way to come to the rescue.”

It seemed to pain him to be unable to say for certain that it would turn out all right. Even amongst the royal family, the duke was a known troublemaker who could not be dealt with via ordinary means.

His last words of advice were, “He’s sweet and indulgent toward his wife.

Perhaps it's better to conquer her first." And then he went home.

I had indeed heard that the duke was a devoted husband, but how exactly were we supposed to "conquer" his wife? I hardly knew anything about Duchess Christine. She originated from House Ballardur, an earldom. She was one year older than him, and the two had been childhood friends. She was a mild-mannered person who did not particularly stand out in society. Beyond that, I had no real information on hand. She always nestled close to her husband with a gentle smile, and she was kind and pleasant to everyone she came into contact with. However, whether or not she was truly a kind person remained a mystery. Whenever I saw her, I got a very strong impression of her as the very model of a perfect lady. She hid her true nature entirely beneath a doll-like smile. *And if she's married to a man like Duke Silvestre, I doubt she can be as kind as she appears. Will we really be able to "conquer" her so easily?*

"Remember," said Lord Simeon, in a somewhat sour tone, "the blame must be placed entirely on Lavia. The root of all evil in this situation is Lutin."

I was musing over how likely the duke was to accept that line of argument when the carriage shook suddenly as if it had driven over a rock.

"Oh!" I cried, hurriedly holding back my glasses as they threatened to fall off my face. My old spare pair had slightly weak arms. The shape of the frames was also rather dated and unfashionable, making my appearance even less appealing than usual.

"You decided not to wear the new pair?" asked Lord Simeon.

"No. It would feel like a waste somehow."

Lord Simeon had, blessedly, recovered the handbag I had thrown out the window of Lutin's carriage the previous afternoon. The necklace and our new pairs of glasses were safe. I had considered wearing my new pair, but they were special glasses with hidden symbolism meant only for the two of us, and I didn't want to start using them in a situation like this. They represented our new life together, so treating them as a mere replacement for my lost pair would have ruined all the scintillating excitement I felt about them.

I added, "And I wouldn't want to break them if we run into more trouble. I'll start wearing them once we're married."

It might have seemed foolish from the outside, but I was not prepared to compromise on this point. In response to my firm declaration, Lord Simeon let out a chuckle and lifted up the large package on the seat beside him.

I remembered seeing this package the day before. Evidently it was not a gift for the duke to thank him for his hospitality, because Lord Simeon presented it to me. "I hope this can cheer you up slightly."

When I took it in my hands, it was surprisingly light. "Is it all right for me to accept this?"

"Absolutely. I bought it for you."

He had to have bought it in Quatre Saisons. Is this what he had been doing when he left me in the cafe? In any case, I took him at his word. When I removed the wrapping and opened the lid, inside sat a white hat decorated with delicate lace and a silk ribbon.

"This is..."

It was the very hat that had caught my eye. He'd noticed that I liked it and had bought it for me.

"I was hoping to give it to you yesterday under more favorable circumstances," said Lord Simeon, blushing slightly.

I shook my head. "You went back especially to get it, didn't you?"

"You seemed unusually taken with it...though I do wish you'd been frank enough to say so."

"I have so many new dresses and hats already, it seemed an extravagance to think of buying more."

Lord Simeon took the hat out of the packaging and placed it on my head. "It suits you."

His pretty face smiled kindly, and I was filled with a ticklish sense of warmth. Feeling my cheeks growing hot, I smiled back at him. "Thank you. It's cheered me up a hundredfold."

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and drew me close. "That's the spirit. Now, let's resolve this today so we can get married without any lingering

troubles.”

“Yes!”

That’s right—tomorrow is a day that will be filled to the brim with joy. That’s why we have to get through today. If Lord Simeon is with me, it will be fine. I know it.

His smiling face came closer, and we lightly kissed one another. My glasses collided with his and slid down my nose again.

The three carriages passed through the city center and back out into the suburbs. Soon we arrived at Duke Silvestre’s holiday home in the southernmost part of the city. The area was close to the sea and featured a vast number of holiday homes and hotels used for tourism. This secondary residence of the duke’s had also been built for such merrymaking, and I had heard that the grounds included all sorts of facilities for that purpose. Knowing that Duke Silvestre had designated this as the meeting place, I could not help feeling a certain foreboding. Lord Simeon had apparently told him that the ring had been lost, in which case you’d expect him to be outraged, so why invite us to his holiday home of all places? Furthermore, this was the season when society truly got underway, so his calendar had to have been very full. It was unnerving that he had so readily accepted a sudden request to meet him. I was certain that this would not be resolved with a mere friendly conversation.

Our group of six, plus three attendants, approached the entrance, where a butler was already waiting and immediately led us inside.

We were brought to a round room with arch-shaped windows. The room was uniformly decorated in white and blue. The walls were painted white with a regular blue pattern on them, and the marble floor was a bluish hue as well. The rippled pattern in the marble stones resembled waves. When I looked up, I saw that the domed ceiling was also blue and decorated with an ostentatious pattern. There was no chandelier; perhaps the room was used only during the day. Sparkling all over the ceiling appeared to be small inset pieces of glass—an awfully elaborate decoration. I considered that they might have wished to avoid installing any lighting that would obstruct the view of the ceiling in order to show it off as clearly as possible.

The room had a refreshing air about it, well suited to the current season. The many windows let in light and a breeze, making it pleasant to stand there.

In the center of this room, on a blue couch facing directly across from the doorway, was the master of the house, sitting comfortably as he awaited our arrival. The large clock behind made him look almost as though he was seated on a throne.

In this opulent room, he simply exuded presence. His black hair, characteristic of the royal family, flowed past his shoulders, and his handsome features resembled those of his cousin, the king. He was in his mid-thirties, and although he was a parent, he did not give off that sort of familial aura. In fact, he did not come across as entirely human. Despite his look of amusement, I did not feel any warmth from him. However, I knew that those pale hands did transmit body heat. I still vividly remembered the size and strength of his body as he had taken me into his arms and tried to pin me down. His breath on my face had been warm as well.

He was, without question, a human born of this world. That much should have been obvious, but I could not stave off the impression of him as somehow detached from reality. *I think I read a story once about a demon that possessed the body of a doll and pretended to be a person? If not, I should write a story with that premise. Wait, now is not the time to be thinking about such things!*

His gray eyes looked upon our group. As he took me in, a cold smile spread across his face, and I froze in fear. *I'm sure this is how a frog feels when a snake is glaring at it. Hehe, this has actually become rather useful reference material! I've no doubt I can write some very lifelike descriptions based on this experience.*

I curtsied without a word and stealthily moved a step closer to Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon presented himself as our spokesperson. "Please excuse us for the sudden intrusion. We greatly appreciate being granted an audience on such short notice."

The duke received him without rising from his seat. "What an interesting collection you are. Lagrange, Easdale, and Lavia. An international affair." He spoke in a languid tone and looked at each of the three men's faces in turn, his smile giving no hint as to his emotions. Evidently he knew Lutin already as well;

perhaps they had met during the time Lutin had spent frequenting the palace in a diplomatic role. Knowing the duke, it was entirely possible he knew about his thievery as well.

Lord Simeon replied, “The ambassador decided he would like to join us in a purely observational capacity. Please do not mind him.”

The ambassador gave a light shrug of the shoulders. He then delivered a graceful bow and greeted the duke. “Indeed it is so. I am deeply curious about this incident, and I’d find it regrettable to only hear about it second hand. I would love to be allowed to observe from a ringside seat. It also seemed a golden opportunity to meet your famously beautiful wife.”

Rather a defiant statement! *I knew this already, but the ambassador is quite the ladykiller.*

The duke snorted softly. “I hear you never tire of spending time in women’s company. Apparently you’re out and about every single day.”

“It is the season of flowers in full bloom, after all. It’s a feast for the eyes.”

“A feast for the eyes, you say? We have a flower here who I fear might be stepped on if one is too careless to notice her.” The duke’s gray eyes turned toward me again. I thought to myself, *You noticed me years ago and tried to step on me intentionally...*

Ambassador Nigel was not deterred. “She’s wonderfully hardy, isn’t she? She stands right back up again even after being stepped on. A flower has more appeal than merely its beauty, you know. Tiny flowers can be unexpectedly fragrant. Besides, sometimes one wishes to simply enjoy as great a number of flowers as possible.”

“Much like an insect.” This time the duke turned his attention to Lutin. Lutin met his slippery gaze with a fearless one of his own. The duke murmured, perhaps to himself, “Here it seems we have one flower being swarmed by three insects.” Then he repeated the word he had used earlier, saying, “How interesting.”

We had not been offered seats and had conducted our introductions while standing. Amongst all of this, Valery Carpentier had been shown virtually no

attention at all, but he steeled his resolve and stepped forward. He began, “Y-y-your Grace, I...”

The faint level of emotion that had arisen in the duke’s gray eyes disappeared, and he looked back expressionlessly.

Valery gulped and lowered his head. “I cannot apologize enough for this upsetting occurrence. It fills me with the deepest of regrets to be unable to fulfill your request. The item was already completed and was only awaiting delivery. Embarrassingly, it was stolen by one of our own employees, and despite making every effort to recover it, we experienced one misfortune after another, and—”

He begged forgiveness with a fluid stream of effusive apologies and explanations, but the duke halted him with a raised hand. Valery jumped with a start and shrank back. Beside him, Claude, too, stood rigid.

The duke looked at the father and son, who had quite a family resemblance, and said, “That’s a somewhat different story than I heard from the messenger last night. I was told the ring was lost in an unforeseeable accident and became impossible to recover.”

“Yes, that’s true,” stammered Valery. “It is truly unfortunate, but of course we’ll return your advance payment, and pay the penalty for breach of contract —”

The duke interrupted again and looked straight at Lutin. “The ring went missing because of that thief there.” *Calling him a thief so directly means he does indeed know about that, I suppose.*

Despite this, Lutin’s composure remained unruffled. The duke had not shown much emotion either, not even raising his voice. Still, all the while he exuded an air of ominous intimidation. I couldn’t be the only one there who felt it. Perhaps it was his royal lineage that made him able to strike such terror in others merely by sitting there quietly. I secretly felt admiration for Lutin, who was able to let the duke’s intense stare wash over him. Though it might not be an attitude worthy of praise, Lutin had nerves of steel. Or perhaps one might say he was entirely shameless?

“It seems Lavia is still in some turmoil,” said the duke.

“Turmoil?” Lutin replied. “Hardly. It’s another useless act of resistance from a group of small-timers and will have no greater impact beyond that. I had intended to simply borrow the ring, but there were indeed a number of misfortunes. The situation took a turn that was far outside of my expectations. I apologize for the inconvenience this has caused you, Your Grace.”

He spoke with a smile that suggested he was not actually sorry at all. I was anxious that this attitude would anger the man he was speaking to, but the duke instead just laughed sarcastically.

Lutin continued, “After discussing the matter, we’ve agreed that Lavia will take on the responsibility of compensating you. I came here to inform you of that.”

“And what does your agreement have to do with me?” replied the duke bluntly. “Why should I have to accept something you decided amongst yourselves?”

After a pause, Lutin added, “All I can do is apologize. I am very sorry that this occurred.”

“And what good does it do to apologize?” The duke looked away, appearing rather bored.

Cold sweat formed on the faces of Claude and Valery.

Lutin hesitated for a moment, then said, “In that case, why don’t we have the same ring made again? It might take some time, but I promise to return exactly the item you ordered.”

Even with this alternate plan on offer, Duke Silvestre did not reply. He didn’t appear to be angry, but his attitude clearly expressed that he was not pleased.

What can we do to satisfy the duke? I thought hard, but nothing came to mind beyond what Lutin had suggested.

I became aware that I had not yet contributed at all. Hadn’t I overcome Lord Simeon’s opposition so that I could apologize to the duke in person? What was I doing? *That’s right... There’s something else to be done before we discuss compensation or replacing the ring.*

Quietly, I took a deep breath and stepped forward. Lord Simeon noticed and moved to stop me, but I shook my head and put myself at the center of the duke's attention. I gave him another deep curtsy. "Good day, Duke Silvestre. Allow me to thank you again for all the help you've given us recently." First I had to say hello. I included just a hint of sarcasm in my greeting—if the matter at hand involved us causing him trouble, it was important to remind him that he had been guilty of the reverse. "I wished to apologize to you in person today. Please allow me to interrupt your conversation with the other gentlemen."

"You wish to apologize as well?" he asked.

"I do. Putting aside all the circumstances that led to it, I was the one who dropped the ring in the river. I managed to recover it, but then while escaping I fell in and lost the ring at the same time."

I hid the trembling of my hands by clasping them tightly together in front of me. With the duke staring at me, I was inevitably struck by fear. Still, I could not simply hide behind Lord Simeon. I had to say what I had come to say.

"I know you must have been looking forward to it a great deal, so please allow me to express my sincerest apologies. I am truly sorry." I bowed my head.

The duke did not say a word. Nor did anyone else; it was though everyone was stuck and pondering their next action.

Just then, a soft and graceful voice interjected. "Good heavens, have you still not offered them a seat? How mean of you."

We all turned around at once to see who had just entered. Accompanied by a maid pushing a cart was a silver-haired lady. It was Duke Silvestre's wife, Duchess Christine. She took us all in with her kind, deep purple eyes and then grinned.

Seeing her graceful beauty up close, a deep understanding soaked into my heart. *The colored diamonds on the ring!*

One of the five colors exactly matched her eyes. Depending on the light, they also looked closer to periwinkle sometimes, which was just like another of the diamonds. The mauve closely resembled her silver hair. The transition from there to the feminine pink hues was no doubt something she was very

accustomed to as well. Yes, there was no doubt the ring had been made especially for Duchess Christine.

I was sure that Claude and his father had paid careful attention to her appearance in selecting the stones. This was not a case of simply seeking out the rarest and most valuable diamonds. It was the most perfectly suited to the duchess that any ring could be.

I wondered if the duke had already seen the diamonds as well. Had he been satisfied that the array of colors was exactly right for his wife? If so, I could understand why he wouldn't readily accept mere apologies now that the ring was lost.

It wasn't as though I hadn't felt *somewhat* guilty until now, of course, but I had been more conscious of how difficult the duke was to deal with. I'd been too focused on what sort of quarrel he might pick with us to even think about his feelings. He was a person I struggled to understand no matter how much I thought about him, but I was sure that even he felt sadness and regret sometimes. I realized now for the first time that he wasn't merely bored by this situation, and I felt sorry from the bottom of my heart. I had been treating the duke purely as a villain, which was a horrible way to think about a victim regardless of what had happened before.

But, no matter how many apologies were given, they were all a matter of mere formality. They were not really words from the heart.

When I looked at the duke again, he was resting his elbows on the back of the couch and leaning his head back. Then he noticed me looking and returned my gaze. *What can I say in apology? How can I show my true feelings that are more than mere words?*

While I was musing, the duke asked, "Did you see the ring?"

"Yes," I said nodding.

He followed up with, "What did you think?"

"What did I think?" What was he trying to ask, I wondered? I didn't understand his intention. After thinking for a moment, I decided to simply tell him exactly what I felt. "It was a very beautiful ring."

“Is that all?”

Indeed, that doesn't quite do it justice. As a humble author, I should make better use of descriptive language.

“It was an unparalleled masterpiece. A perfect collection of the highest quality colored diamonds. The design was not ostentatious and gaudy, but so simple that at a glance it almost looked plain—but that in itself gave it a refined and noble quality. It was a ring that tested the eyes of those who gazed upon it. And, seeing your wife now, I understand how perfectly fitting it would have looked on her finger.” The duke did not say a word, so I added, “It is terribly regrettable that I lost it. It makes me feel very sorry indeed.”

Silence fell. The duke remained quiet, and I had nothing further to say either. Lord Simeon and the others stood wordlessly as well.

The duchess quietly walked over and stood next to her husband. She stroked his shoulder with a graceful hand. Then, as if that had been some sort of communication just between the two of them, the duke finally opened his mouth.

“I see. It sounds as though it was very well made.”

“Yes,” I replied simply.

A smile suddenly appeared on the duke's lips. It was different from the way he had smiled so far. I didn't sense any coldness from it.

“Carpentier!” he said.

Valery's shoulders jumped. “Y-yes!”

“Excellent work. I will pay the three million algiers as promised.”

“Wh...wha...?”

“Since I paid one million in advance, that leaves a balance of two million.” After speaking those words in a detached tone, the duke lifted one hand. Without a moment's delay, the butler stepped forward holding a silver tray. The duke picked up a check and pen from the tray, then scribbled with a rustling sound and handed them back to the butler.

The butler came over and handed the check to Valery, who looked back and

forth between the check and duke several times with a look of disbelief. “But... This is... You...”

“I promised you three million, didn’t I? Are you saying that’s not sufficient?”

“No, no, no! That would be absurd! But...the ring, it’s no longer... Is the intention that I should make it again using this money?”

“Hmm, indeed...” Duke Silvestre put a long finger on his chin and nodded. Then he looked up at his wife beside him. “Christine, which would you prefer? The same ring again, or a replacement that’s even more spectacular?”

Her smile widened and she shook her head. “I appreciate the sentiment that went into the gift, dear, and the efforts on the Carpentiers’ part that went into making it. I don’t need the diamonds themselves anymore. What I’d like more are some pearls that will match my summer wardrobe. I’d like them to be small and cute, like seafoam.”

“Do you mean to become a mermaid?” the duke replied.

“After all, dear, you are less like a prince and more like a king of the ocean.”

In response to his wife’s words, the duke let out a faint laugh. *Are they...flirting with one another in front of our eyes? Are we supposed to be embarrassed?*

With a tone that suggested he was somehow inconvenienced by her answer to his initial question, Duke Silvestre turned back to Valery and said, “There you have it. A pearl ring, and...I suppose we might as well have a complete set, so I’d like a necklace and earrings as well.”

“All of that?” Valery stammered.

“Yes. You must have them ready quickly, mind. We’ll need them in time for summer. Pearls should be simple enough to obtain at short notice, yes?”

“Yes!” stammered Valery. “Of course, absolutely!”

“I’ll pay upon receipt of the goods,” said the duke in conclusion, as though this was nothing.

All of us watching were surprise incarnate. In addition to paying the full price of the lost ring, he was making a new order—and if he meant to pay the cost of

that as well, he was being remarkably generous. I wondered how much the total would come to. I knew his degree of wealth was entirely incomparable to that of my own family, but this still came as a shock.

I recalled the rumors I had heard that his behavior was driven by his whims. He might toy with someone cruelly, and then, for just as little reason, help someone unconditionally. No one knew the basis upon which he decided. Most likely, the duke himself did not know either. His feelings at any given moment could make him good or evil. To Valery and Claude, he must have seemed like a god.

He waved a hand, shooing the Carpentiers away. "That's enough of you now. Leave us." He turned his face away coldly, as though all connection to them was gone.

They looked towards us, rather perplexed. Lord Simeon nodded, and at last the two of them expressed their gratitude one last time before departing.

After watching them go, Lutin spoke up. "What a surprise to see such generosity. It appears that compensation is no longer needed after all."

Duke Silvestre laughed gutturally.

What was that? A cold shiver ran down my spine. I have a feeling that laugh means nothing good.

"Who said any such thing?" said the duke. "I don't need money, but I'll still have you make up for it."

A hint of a malicious smile was visible in his gray eyes as he looked around at us. *So it comes to this after all. Just as I'd started to look at him in a new light! I was thinking: perhaps he isn't all bad, and isn't it charming how well he gets along with his wife... How foolish I was!*

He continued, "Now, why don't you sit down and we can have a nice long chat about it?"

Laughing, he had finally offered us seats. I doubted any of us felt happy about it. We were sacrifices being offered up to a demon lord. The malice wafting from him was so intense, I could practically feel it. Deep creases were etched on Lord Simeon's forehead, and Lutin's gaze wandered awkwardly. Even

Ambassador Nigel, who had no reason at all to feel guilty, appeared slightly out of sorts.

Lord Simeon and I sat together on a couch, while Lutin and Ambassador Nigel sat down in separate chairs of their own. Duchess Christine took a seat next to her husband. Our couch was upholstered with blue fabric that matched the one the duke and duchess were sitting on, while the other chairs were covered in leather. To accommodate all of us, some seats had been brought in from another room, explaining the incongruity. *And this throw I'm sitting on—it appears to be sheepskin? It doesn't quite fit the room's atmosphere.*

I looked at the large clock again and felt uneasy. The main focus of the room's decor was the beautiful mixture of white and blue, so it seemed a poor choice for this one item of furniture to stand out so much by its presence. There was also a lion ornament above the fireplace. Though I'd thought at first glance that the room was very tastefully decorated, looking in more detail made me realize just how many odd elements there were.

Had he deliberately led us to a room that was still unfinished in order to mock us by suggesting that he didn't feel inclined to treat us as proper guests? Such behavior did not seem impossible for the duke. Or was this simply his taste? Was his apparent good taste in clothes actually due to Duchess Christine choosing all his outfits for him?

It bothered me, but I did not point it out. All of us stayed silent and even-tempered, pretending all was well as a maid served us tea.

After we had all had a sip of tea, Lord Simeon asked, "What exactly do you mean by 'make up for it'? What is your desire?"

"A fine question indeed," Duke Silvestre replied. We were sitting directly across from the duke and duchess, so it felt as though we were practically face to face as the duke's gray eyes regarded me. "My desire is for that little bunny rabbit."

"Absolutely not." An immediate reply from Lord Simeon, leaving not even a second's gap. The words cut like a sword of ice.

"She came here to apologize, did she not?" asked the duke.

“Of course. Her intention was to explain and to apologize. However, the actual fault lies with Lavia, and all responsibility for compensation should also fall on their shoulders. I consider it unreasonable to demand anything of Marielle or myself.”

“You speak of where the fault lies,” came the languid reply, “but as of now, I don’t really understand the cause and effect of what happened at all.”

Lord Simeon was momentarily lost for words. Now that the duke mentioned it, we still hadn’t explained the full details. He’d been given just a rough outline the night before, but perhaps we still needed to tell the story in full.

“Yes, my apologies. Indeed, we must explain what occurred,” said Lutin, taking over the conversation. He explained it all from the start, including the scheme’s origins amongst the Lavian nobility. I had thought he might subtly finesse the story to try and downplay his own responsibility, but he accepted fault with a surprising degree of honesty, even covering for me.

He then asked Ambassador Nigel to give his own statement as a witness who had happened to be present at the scene yesterday. “I only became involved at the point when she fell into the river, but... Well, ordinarily it would be unthinkable to see a young noblewoman riding a boat that she had no way of steering on her own. One can deduce that she was truly forced into that situation. Besides, in no way did she look like she was enjoying herself.” Though he kept within the boundaries of what he had seen with his own eyes, he still gave me a hearty defense. He added, “Earl Cialdini accepts full responsibility, so surely it’s suitable that all demands for repayment are directed toward Lavia? I’ll note that if this becomes a matter that Easdale is unable to turn a blind eye to, I’d find it rather inconvenient.”

With his last point, he underlined that, depending on where things led next, he might have to step in. I certainly definitely did not want this to evolve into a situation where our three countries were at loggerheads either. However, I became anxious that saying something like that would only excite the duke’s contrarian spirit.

Filled with trepidation, I watched the duke’s reaction carefully. We had to be prepared for anything. *Still, when push comes to shove, at least we can ask His*

Highness for help if we need it. But I could not tell what the duke was thinking at all. He simply gazed at all of us as though he was very amused. His wife, looking at him with a gentle expression, appeared to have no intention of intervening.

Eventually he looked at me and said with a touch of mockery, “You’re treated awfully precious, aren’t you? You must be more of a juicy morsel of bait than you appear if you’re able to reel in influential figures from Lagrange, Lavia, and Easdale. It makes me want you even more.”

I couldn’t manage any response at all, even a request that he not make such a joke. Honestly, I wondered how seriously he meant it. His wife was right next to him, listening to the whole conversation. I didn’t understand why he would express a desire to put his hands on another woman. Surely there was no lady in the world who wouldn’t be bothered by that. Not to mention that I was a plain little girl who could not remotely compare to Duchess Christine.

That look in his eye says that he isn’t drawn toward me specifically, but that he’s using me in order to manipulate Lord Simeon and the others. Yes, that must be it.

But Lavia and Easdale certainly wouldn’t be manipulated so easily. The only one who truly loved me, and wished to protect me, was Lord Simeon. But if I said that, would the duke believe me? *Even if he did, that would only lead him to focus all his wrath on Lord Simeon alone, which would be even worse.*

“Well, that settles it,” he said. “I will have you after all.”

Lord Simeon’s voice grew deep and chilling, and his eyes sharpened. “As I said, that is out of the question.” I sensed anger emanating from him that he was unable to suppress. Given what had happened before, it seemed he was going to be drawn in by the duke’s provocation no matter what. Perhaps without realizing it, he gripped my hand tightly even as he continued to look straight ahead at the duke. “No matter how valuable the ring was, it cannot be equated to a human body. An equivalent amount of money should be sufficient compensation. Would you like to bring the matter before a judge? I’m quite certain our side would be victorious.”

“Are you suggesting a trial?” asked the duke, sneering. “You would be content for this matter to draw that much public attention? Well, if that’s what you

wish, I'll gladly play along."

Lutin hurriedly interrupted, "No, that would be rather less than ideal. Would you mind toning it down somewhat, Vice Captain? You must understand this is the type of story that the public cannot hear about."

"Your business is no concern of mine," replied Lord Simeon curtly.

"Is it not? Shall I take that as the official response from the Kingdom of Lagrange? If so, I shall return to Lavia and report it to the grand duke."

Lord Simeon turned his head to face Lutin. If looks could kill, Lutin would have been dead in an instant. But even as Lord Simeon glared with clear murderous intent, he did not comment any further. *Indeed... Just because Lutin has taken things in such a boldly untactful direction does not mean Lord Simeon can lower himself to the same level.* If things got too complicated between Lagrange and Lavia, the relationship could sour between our two nations. This could even result in Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto's engagement being reset to square one. Lutin had only accepted responsibility for compensating the duke in exchange for keeping the matter private and letting Lavia resolve it internally.

Ambassador Nigel watched the pair's exchange with a distant air about him. He was not about to ally himself with either side. Instead, he was monitoring to ensure that the outcome caused no disadvantage for his own country. *And, if he sees an opening, I'm sure he'll try to curry favor with Lavia.*

I looked down at my hand. I could feel Lord Simeon's emotions through his painfully strong grip. I calmed myself with a surreptitious breath, summoned all my willpower, and lifted my head once more.

The duke looked at me. I received his gaze head-on and returned it in kind.

"Your Grace, what is it you demand of me, exactly? You said that you'll 'have me,' but I'm sure you don't particularly desire me for my feminine attributes. Is there some scheme you mean to carry out with me?"

The duke's thought processes were a puzzle, but at this moment I understood them quite clearly. He saw me as "bait" to be used in some prank or other. He'd said as much just now. And with me as the bait, he'd easily be able to reel in Lord Simeon. Perhaps he thought he could even lure Lutin and the ambassador.

“I would be quite content to use you as a woman,” said the duke.

“Quite a joke to make in front of your wife,” I replied.

“I don’t see the issue. My wife is my wife, and you are you.”

He spoke in a placid tone that I could not think of as truly wicked. Duchess Christine, too, smiled calmly beside him.

In other words, when he involves himself with ladies other than his wife, he sees it as pure entertainment and nothing more. The ladies are temporary playthings. It seemed his wife approved of this, which was not exactly an uncommon scenario amongst the nobility. That said, my own parents got on well with one another and my father did not have any lovers on the side. Lord Simeon’s father, too, seemed to harbor no passion for anything other than his wife and his research.

Lord Simeon, apparently unable to understand the dynamic at play, made a face as though he was looking at a demon.

I decided to ignore the duke’s jesting. Responding seriously to each and every word he said would get me absolutely nowhere. On the contrary, it would only amuse him. Instead I asked, “What is your aim, then?”

My defiant attitude made the duke take on a smile of amusement that filled his entire face. “You are my aim. Let’s see... I’d pardon the debt in exchange for one night with you. One night for three million algiers seems like a fair price.”

Anger shot through Lord Simeon’s whole body again. This time I squeezed his hand, giving him a signal to calm down.

“Goodness, how extraordinary,” I replied. “I doubt even Tarentule’s finest courtesans can command such a high price. There is certainly no way I can provide enough satisfaction to justify it.”

“We shall see. It all depends on you and your companions. Let us postpone your fulfillment of the bargain. If you have satisfied me enough by noon tomorrow, I will let you all go without another word. If not, I shall have you for one night.”

Satisfy him? How? In what manner? And besides... “Tomorrow at noon, you

said? But...our wedding is tomorrow.”

“I am well aware. And?”

I closed my eyes and restrained myself. I could not let myself get angry here. He was needling me on purpose, so reacting strongly would be counterproductive. “What, specifically, do we have to do in order to satisfy you?”

“Nothing too alarming. I’d like you to play some games with me, that’s all. That is why I brought you to my holiday home. I have all sorts of facilities here that will allow us to keep playing without ever getting bored.”

So it’s come back to that after all. I lost all my anger and fear, and merely felt exhausted instead.

The duke laughed—a malevolent chuckle. “We have a large enough party to truly enjoy ourselves. I’m sure everyone will have a fabulous time.”

From his tone, I was certain he was not proposing any ordinary variety of games. Wondering what he was going to do to us, I looked upward. The fragments of glass twinkled on the patterned ceiling. *Whew, no matter how many times I look at that, it’s beautiful.*

“Everyone?” said Lutin with an indefinable expression.

“Am I to be counted in this as well?” asked Ambassador Nigel, appearing slightly disgruntled.

“It seems so,” Lutin replied.

The ambassador played with his honey-colored hair for a moment, then soon muttered, “Well, why not. A lady is in trouble, after all. I will assist.” He flashed me a kind smile.

The only one still feeling aggrieved was Lord Simeon. He turned to me. “This is not a matter to be joking about! You cannot seriously mean to use your own body as the stakes in a bet!”

“It’s...it’s all right. All we have to do is engage in enough fun and merriment to satisfy the duke.”

“That is far from all right! It fundamentally puts us at an overwhelming

disadvantage. The result is decided purely based on the duke's feelings. Regardless of what we do, if he says it's insufficient, we lose."

"Well..."

The duke interjected in response to this entirely valid point. "You needn't worry. If I truly am enjoying myself, I'll admit to it. As I said, it depends on you. You came here today as an act of good faith, did you not? To flatly refuse my request and try to coerce me with your own excuses hardly seems befitting of that."

"Coerce you?" said Lord Simeon, seething. "If anything, you're the one who —"

"Honestly, you make it sound as though I'm asking dear Miss Marielle to give up her whole life, or become my paramour. Even if you lose, I told you I'd keep it to just one night. I think it's an exceptional proposal, don't you?"

At this point, my only relief was that Lord Simeon was in plain clothes. If he was wearing his sword belt, I've no doubt he would have drawn his saber without hesitation. He could no longer constrain his anger at all anymore. He glared at the duke with intense hatred. I held onto his hand for dear life—it was all I could do to ensure he didn't start throwing punches as he had yesterday with Lutin.

But this reaction alone seemed to have amused the duke rather a lot. He knew exactly how to incur Lord Simeon's wrath, and he did so with great precision. It was just as Ambassador Nigel had said: Lord Simeon became awfully intense when I was involved. Lord Simeon had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker, losing his usual level-headedness altogether.

This was the very thing that made Duke Silvestre so unpleasant to deal with. Although he was a free spirit who lived according to his own tastes and whims, he was also highly intelligent and knew exactly how to drive other people into a corner. Combining that with the power afforded by his high status, he was able to toy with almost anyone.

To tell the truth, I did not see the situation as overly dire. If the duke bought me for a single night, it would be no fun for him at all. That was nothing but a pretext. His real aim was to drag Lord Simeon into his web and play with him.

Perhaps Lutin and the ambassador as well. All he wanted was to manipulate and harass us.

As such, I felt relatively confident that he would let us go by noon tomorrow at the very latest. However, the ceremony was due to start at ten, so that still meant we wouldn't make it in time. *I want to try and wrest permission from him as early as possible, but if there's really no other way, we could push back the start time...or even delay it until another day. But, no, that would cause all sorts of problems!*

When it came down to it, I really did want to make it to the ceremony on time.

"Simply relax for the time being," said the duke. "Christine, make the preparations."

"I suppose I must," replied the duchess, laughing as she stood from her seat. She came over to me and urged me to go with her.

"Marielle!" began Lord Simeon.

But I stood and told him, "It's all right. Don't worry." I used a smidgen of force to shake myself free from his hands as they tried to pull me back. I turned to the duke. "Your Grace, I...told my family I'd be back by nightfall. I'd like to inform them I'll be staying here."

"Yes, indeed. I'll send a messenger."

"No no, I don't want to trouble you like that. I can simply send our carriage home."

"Oh, it's no bother. I'll gladly show hospitality to your servants as well."

So, he wasn't going to allow even one person to escape. We were to be left without any way to contact the outside world.

This meant we couldn't request help from His Highness either.

Realizing this as well, Lord Simeon grimaced. I resignedly patted him on the shoulder before leaving the room with the duchess.

Chapter Ten

I wasn't sure what sort of preparations to expect, but we were led to a dressing room, where Duchess Christine seemed to delight in browsing through the racks of dresses. "Which will be most effective, I wonder?" Several times she took one out and tried holding it up to me, then changed her mind and sought out another.

"Excuse me," I said, "but...you'd like me to get changed?" *Why would that be needed? What kind of game is afoot?*

"You needn't be so nervous. Everything will be all right." Smiling kindly, the duchess pulled out a dress in a dusky rose hue decorated with black lace and ribbons. Had she worn this in her girlhood days, I wondered? It seemed too young for her now that she was in her thirties. It would look too ostentatious. "Perfect," she said.

"I really don't think it suits me," I replied.

"Oh, I'm sure it will. We need to change your makeup to match, that's all."

A team of maids skillfully stripped me of my own clothes and changed me into the dress the duchess had selected. As they did this, even more maids swarmed into the room. *What on earth are they all needed for? There's only one of me!* But it soon became clear they hadn't been summoned to help me get changed.

The duchess began to point at them. "Yes, you'll do nicely. And you, and...you. And you two over there—I think I'll include you as well."

The very last one chosen was a senior maid who looked over forty. The duchess had chosen not only young maids, but older ones as well. *What can she possibly be planning?*

"The others will assist. Now, begin."

The duchess clapped her hands and the chosen maids all stripped off their livery at once and began to choose dresses from amongst those in the room.

“Wh-what is going on?” I said, as I was brought in front of a mirror.

“You have such beautiful hair,” said a maid with a comb in her hand. “I’m sure it looks better down, but hopefully you won’t mind me putting it up today.” She began gathering up my hair without waiting for an answer, styling it into a very compact look with even the edges braided and not a single strand left hanging.

The maids also removed my makeup and reapplied it from scratch. They layered it on rather thickly, and the lipstick was a deeper and more amorous shade than I had ever used before. It stood out so much that I felt uncomfortable.

“A rose, a lilac, a daisy, or a violet... Which is best, I wonder?”

I was shown a selection of artificial flowers used for decorating hats. I sighed and chose the violet. My face was then covered in black lace that hid it completely before a hat was placed atop my head. I looked like a dress-up doll.

I took a glance around and began to catch on to the duchess’s aim. All the maids she had chosen had their hair and faces hidden just like me. That wasn’t all they had in common with me—they were of similar stature and physique as well. My average build made it easy to find others who matched it. After all, disappearing into the crowd due to my lack of distinguishing features was my very nature. My specialty, even.

So, they’ve contrived a way to use that against me. With me included, there were now seven women with hidden faces.

“Excellent. Very well done.”

The duchess expressed her appreciation to the maids for their efforts, while I was quietly impressed at the sight of us all reflected in the mirror. We really all looked alike. Dressed up like this, with our faces all hidden in the same manner, there was no way to tell who was who. Even the middle-aged maid looked indistinguishable from the younger maids. For a moment I even thought I might forget which one was me!

Even for me, there was such a thing as standing out too little. If I had blended in this well in high society, I doubted even Lord Simeon would have been able to notice me and fall in love.

Now that the preparations were made, we moved into a mirror-lined room that looked as though it might be intended for dance practice. There were no tables, just several chairs placed along one wall. Additional chairs were brought in to allow everyone to sit, and the group of women, akin to a collection of dolls, was instructed to sit in silence.

“No cheating,” said the duchess. “Don’t make a sound or give any signals at all. You must sit silently and look straight ahead. It’s up to the gentlemen to choose.”

“So the purpose of the game is for Lord Simeon to identify me correctly?”

The duchess giggled. It felt slightly odd to see her so entertained by this.

“Duchess Christine,” I asked, “does it really not bother you at all? Even if it was only to harass us, your husband made comments about desiring another woman. Isn’t it rather distasteful for him to make you help him with such a scheme?”

“Goodness,” she said, opening her eyes in astonishment for a moment before smiling kindly again. It was a perfect smile—I did not sense any loathing or contempt toward me. “Indeed, I suppose in my place you would find it rather unpleasant.”

“I suspect most people would.”

“Perhaps.” She chuckled, but still did not agree with me. “Maurice and I have been friends since childhood. I know him very well.”

“I see,” I replied.

“Please, don’t hate him too much. It’s not meant as harassment. He’s bored, that’s all.”

So we’re all mere playthings to be used for alleviating his boredom, is that it? Hearing her say it didn’t make it any easier to swallow. “But how could he be bored with such a beautiful wife by his side? He’s begging for divine punishment.”

“Oh my,” said the duchess.

If he’s bored, he should seek out things to fanboy over. Reading books is

excellent for that, or seeing plays—even writing them himself! I didn't understand people who said they had nothing to do, or weren't sure how to spend their time. The world is overflowing with things to fangirl or fanboy over. No one could possibly have the time or energy to keep up with them all. I always had far too many things to do. There was no time to be bored.

And there are plenty of hobbies he could seek out other than books and plays. There are people who like mountain climbing, or even just running. With his vast fortune, he could travel the world.

But as I angrily considered this, I realized I had arrived at the answer myself. *Of course. What sets the duke's fanboy heart aflame are his practical jokes—manipulating other people and making them into his toys.*

"What's wrong?" asked the duchess. "You're hanging your head all of a sudden."

"It's nothing. Simply that I've found I can actually understand him very well."

Which makes it so much harder to object. I can really relate to the idea of pursuing what you love at all costs.

And yet, there is such a thing as too high a cost, isn't there? He shouldn't be letting it inconvenience other people. I would never do that! Although I suppose I've actually caused Lord Simeon and His Highness plenty of inconvenience at times...

The more I thought about it, the less I felt able to criticize. This left me rather dejected, and my shoulders slumped. His Highness had said to conquer the duke's wife, but it seemed this would be impossible. She was neither inconvenienced nor annoyed by her husband's games, but rather was in full support of them.

I sighed, feeling quite at the end of my tether. Just then, I heard footsteps drawing closer.

Duchess Christine clapped me lightly on the shoulder and moved further away. "Do you understand? Look straight ahead and don't make a sound. If you break the rules, we'll consider your team to have lost."

The maids dressed as my copies sat with very straight posture as well, and I

did not hear the slightest murmur from them. When the men arrived at last, they each stopped and reacted with quite some surprise.

“What’s this?” said Ambassador Nigel, looking around.

Lutin smiled wryly and shrugged. “I see what’s going on here.”

Lord Simeon did not say a word. He simply looked at each of us in turn.

Duke Silvestre entered the room behind them. “Seven, eh? I’d have liked it if you had prepared a few more.”

The duchess walked over to him and stood by his side. “These were the only ones we had who were exactly right, but I’d say it’s plenty. Do you know which is the right one, dear?”

“Not at all,” said the duke, laughing as he put an arm around his wife’s waist. “Though I’m confident you would be able to.”

“But will *they* be able to? That’s the real question.”

“I’m certain they will,” replied the duke, “if there’s love in their hearts.”

Hearing the word “love” from the duke’s mouth gave me an uncomfortable feeling all the way down my back—cold and itchy. Lord Simeon momentarily looked quite disapproving, then turned a rational gaze upon the seven of us.

The duke turned to the group of gentlemen. “If, out of the three of you, even one chooses correctly, I’ll count it as your victory. If all of you fail, however, then... Hmm, what shall I do?”

I just barely held back the urge to cry: *You haven’t even decided!?* I hadn’t expected this level of ad-hoc indecision.

“Ah, I know,” he continued. “I’ll make it two nights rather than one.” He nodded as if to confirm what a good idea this was.

“What!?” growled Lord Simeon, momentarily turning very angry. However, he quickly restrained himself and did not say anything further.

“Now,” said the duke, “you must choose from where you are currently standing. Do not move a single step closer.”

Having stressed that point, he retreated to the far wall with his wife. Lord

Simeon, Lutin, and Ambassador Nigel stayed in the positions they'd arrived at when they entered the room and looked around.

There were seven women, all dressed identically. Our faces and hair were hidden, and even our hands, which might have revealed some unique traits, were covered with gloves. With all of them sitting still and saying nothing, finding the real me seemed a very challenging task indeed.

Being able to blend in and remain unnoticed was a special skill that I was rather proud of. I had never imagined a situation where the opposite would be required—and all I could do was sit and stare straight forward. I wasn't sure if they would manage it.

The mirrors on the walls reflected everyone in the room. The mirrors themselves were also reflected again and again, creating the optical illusion that there were dozens of people present. The three men pondered the situation with solemn looks on their faces. Even Lutin entirely lacked his usual jocular expression. *And is it my imagination that Ambassador Nigel's eyes are staring only at our breasts? What exactly is his plan for distinguishing us!?*

The duke waited for what could only have been a few minutes before speaking again. "Well? I should hope you're ready by now. Each of you walk over to the one you think is the real Miss Marielle."

The one who stepped forward first, without any hesitation, was Lord Simeon. Lutin walked close behind him, and the ambassador hesitated only for a moment before setting off as well. Their footsteps echoed in the room.

"Goodness," said the duke.

"My oh my!" said his wife.

All three of them had come straight towards me.

"Marielle," said Lord Simeon, standing before me and offering his hand. His gaze had been set on me the entire time and had never wavered to any of the others.

Wondering if I was allowed to take Lord Simeon's hand, I glanced at the duke to take in his reaction.

“To think that all three of you would choose the same one,” he said. “Choosing differently would have greatly increased your chances of success, wouldn’t you say?”

“There was no need,” Lord Simeon declared, full of confidence. “This is the real Marielle.” Since I didn’t move, he took my hand and pulled me to my feet with a certain degree of force.

“Well, Christine?” asked the duke, turning to his wife.

“The power of love truly is magnificent,” she replied, applauding briefly.

Lord Simeon took off the hat and lace covering my head. Looking at me with his light blue eyes, he smiled kindly. I could not help smiling as well. *Lord Simeon always finds me, wherever I am. Even if there are people all around, even if I change my appearance completely, he always finds me.*

After all, he was the man who had noticed me, and fallen in love with me, all while I was hiding my presence and blending into the background in society.



Indeed, this is the power of love! Did you see that, Duke Silvestre!?

But when I looked at the duke, full of triumphant pride, he muttered apathetically, “All of them getting it right so quickly? How very dull.”

What? Even though we won, he still found it boring? Would he rather one or two of them had chosen wrongly in order to provide more entertainment? Ugh, I’m sure he’d only have found something else to complain about...

Speaking more loudly, he said, “Tell me what you based your decisions on. Personally I couldn’t distinguish them at all.”

He turned his attention to Ambassador Nigel first. Looking at me, the latter replied, “Well, her figure, you see.”

But even though he was facing me, he didn’t meet my eyes. His gaze was focused slightly lower. *I knew it! Ugh, honestly!*

In a manner of speaking, however, it was quite remarkable for him to be able to tell me apart from the other women when our figures were all so similar. Personally I did not see a clear enough difference.

Lord Simeon, too, realized what the ambassador meant and glared at him, wrapping his arms around me to hide me from view.

The next to be asked was Lutin, who said, “Her posture. No matter what attire a person is dressed in, it’s impossible to erase the habits that are ingrained in their body. The other ladies are servants, correct? They carry themselves differently from a young lady who has grown up having etiquette drummed into her. Even while sitting, the difference is quite evident. The way she extends her back, the height of her shoulders, the angle between her neck and her head... Even her hands are not simply left lying in her lap without purpose. A lady who has been trained from a young age arranges everything beautifully.”

Truly the words of a master of disguise. He perceived not only the external factors like a person’s clothing and hairstyle, but the finer details of their habits as well. *From the opposite perspective, does this mean he intentionally changes those aspects of himself to successfully imitate other people?* I wrote that down in the notebook in my heart—it felt like important reference material.

“And the violet on her hat. It’s your favorite flower, isn’t it?” He looked at me and gave a smug wink.

How has he even managed to research that detail about me? Unlike my older brother, I spoke about flowers only rarely.

“You seem surprised,” he said. “but it’s not so odd that I’d realize that. Your things often have violets embroidered on them, and if you see anything with a violet design on it, such as tableware or vases, it always catches your attention. You tend to focus obsessively on the things you like—it’s in your nature. I imagine your bedroom is also filled with items decorated with violet patterns.”

I had nothing to say to that.

“If I were to give you flowers,” Lutin added, turning to Lord Simeon with a provocative look, “they’d be violets, not roses.”

Lord Simeon did not say a word; he just silently glowered back. I softly stroked his hand.

“I like roses, too,” I objected.

Admittedly I did like violets, but all flowers were perfectly lovely. I couldn’t imagine any flowers I’d be unhappy to receive as a gift. The crimson roses I had received from Lord Simeon some time ago were a wonderful memory for me.

“Very well, I see,” said Duke Silvestre, smirking at Lord Simeon and Lutin as they glared at one another. “Then, last but not least, I’ll ask the fiancé to share his expertise.”

But I knew the reason so definitively that Lord Simeon hardly needed to reply. *Obviously, it’s love! Love is a force that defies all reason and draws two people together no matter what!*

He turned toward the duke and answered curtly, “Her skeletal structure.”

I was momentarily unable to believe what I had heard.

Then, without meaning to, I exclaimed, “What!?”

What did he just say? My...skeletal structure!? He identified me based on my...what!?

The duke, too, appeared to be rather taken aback by this response. He lost his smile and blinked. “Her...skeletal structure?”

“Yes.”

Lutin and Ambassador Nigel furrowed their brows as well. All of them made faces that suggested they were entirely bewildered by Lord Simeon’s words.

He explained, “No matter how similar they might appear, everyone has a unique skeletal structure. Even if a person changes their outfit or their behavior, it’s the one thing they cannot change no matter what. When remembering people’s unique characteristics, this is the one to use as the basis. It’s visible through clothing to a certain degree, and fortunately we’re in the warmer months, where relatively light clothing is preferred, so distinguishing her was quite straightforward.”

No words could be heard from anyone in the room. An atmosphere of perplexity took hold; no one knew how to respond to that.

My skeletal structure!? Though I must admit, it is an answer that feels very true to Lord Simeon.

“So...it wasn’t love?” I uttered, thoroughly exhausted. Admittedly, it was a very impressive skill! Telling people apart based only on their skeletons must be easier said than done, especially through their clothes. Lord Simeon really was incredible, being able to do such a thing. His subordinates were not wrong to describe him as superhuman! *But still... It wasn’t the power of love, was it?*

He looked at me. “I’m sure you realize this is separate from matters of the heart and soul. It was a question of what method I used to judge correctly.”

“Yes, yes, I know that. I know that’s the sort of person you are, Lord Simeon. No wonder you’re the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. You look at everything with the eyes of a hawk, cool and meticulous, never neglecting a single detail. It’s so terrific, I can’t help fangirling over you!”

“That sounds a little more forced than usual.”

“It’s fine! I can’t go on unless I can see it that way. It means you love me right down to my bones!”

“Your bones, your internal organs, all of it.”

“Even my internal organs!? Don’t tell me you know the shape of my internal organs!?”

“No, I suppose not...although I do think your stomach is probably rather small.”

“My stomach! Around here, yes!?”

“No, Marielle, that would be your intestines.”

Everyone present was staring vacantly at our exchange, but abruptly the duke let out a sound. He put a hand to his mouth and turned to face away from us. His shoulders shook with stifled laughter, and he clutched his chest.

“Heh... hehehe... Bones...and internal organs...? Heh!”

After a moment I realized. *He’s laughing at us!* This wasn’t his usual distant manner of looking down at us from on high, but rather a laugh of genuine amusement from the bottom of his heart. His wife, standing beside him, looked a tiny bit surprised. I began to feel slightly embarrassed. *Did our behavior just now really justify being laughed at so hard by a person like him?*

Still, I’m glad we’ve entertained him...

He turned back to us, fighting to suppress his laughter. “Hehe, very well, you win. That was most enjoyable.”

I leaned forward eagerly. “Oh, so then...”

“That’s right. We’ll move on to the next round.”

My momentary hopes were dashed immediately. *No, I suppose he wouldn’t let us go so easily.*

Upon the duke’s signal, the maids who had been serving as my doubles put their hands on the closest mirror and pulled it open to reveal a passageway. The mirror had been a secret door all along.

“I shall see you again in a room underground. The four of you will set off from here.”

The narrow path was also lined with mirrors. The manifold reflections made it

hard to tell in which directions it led. I was mystified even looking at it. I could confidently predict that our descent to the underground room would be far from simple.

With no other choice, we walked towards the opened entryway. Behind us, the duke called in a malevolent tone, "You might want to preserve your strength!" I wondered what sort of tricks we were about to encounter.

Lutin entered at the vanguard, followed by Lord Simeon, while Ambassador Nigel served as the rear guard. I was sandwiched between the latter two. The path was so narrow that we had to walk single file. The skirt of my dress rustled as it brushed against the mirrors on both sides.

Lutin gazed all around as he walked. "I wonder where the light is coming in from? With all these mirrors, it's hard to tell."

"Using mirrors to confound us," said the ambassador. "It would certainly take a man of unique tastes to have a feature like this built into a house."

"Well, it is a holiday home built for his own pleasure," I replied, looking around as well. Not only the walls, but even the ceiling was mirrored. We were reflected infinitely beyond the glass, and the refracting light glared in my eyes. It would be easy to lose track of who was real and who was not.

"Wait... Hmm?" Suddenly I realized that Lord Simeon, who I'd been keeping close to, was now some distance ahead. Panicking, I quickened my pace slightly to try and catch up.

"Hold on!" called out Ambassador Nigel from behind me. At that moment I collided with something solid and was rebuffed. I yelped in pain.

"Marielle!?" cried the image of Lord Simeon in the mirror. *But... How!? Where is the real one!?*

I replaced my glasses, which had slid off my face. "Ugh, that hurt... But, why? How did...?" I reached out, searching for Lord Simeon, but all my hands found was a mirror, coldly rebuffing me. "Lord Simeon!"

"Stay calm, Marielle. First of all, are you hurt?" I sensed that in an effort to calm me down, Lord Simeon was deliberately making his voice as composed as possible.

Holding back my trembling, I nodded. “I’m fine. It only hurt a tiny bit.”

“In that case, you should go back along the same path you followed. I’ll do the same, and that should let us regroup. It seems we took separate routes at some point without realizing we had split up.”

“Yes, indeed,” I replied hesitantly.

If we’re able to talk like this without shouting, we can’t be too far apart. And we’re inside a building, so it can’t be a space that stretches out forever. Telling myself that it was fine, I did an about face.

“Let’s hold hands so we don’t get separated,” said Ambassador Nigel, taking me by the hand. “Please don’t glower at me, Vice Captain Flaubert. It’s to keep your fiancée safe.”

“Then please go ahead,” said Lord Simeon in a rather reluctant tone.

We began to retrace our steps. We hadn’t come especially far yet, so we should have been reunited straight away. And yet, no matter how far the ambassador and I walked, we didn’t encounter Lord Simeon. On the contrary, his voice rapidly grew further away, and his reflection in the mirrors became smaller.

“Marielle, over here!” Lutin called out, but his voice echoing off the mirrors only made me lose my sense of distance even more. I wished I could simply stay where I was and huddle on the floor. I closed my eyes and covered my ears, which made all the elements leading me astray disappear, but I could hardly keep going without being able to see.

“It’s a mirror maze,” said Ambassador Nigel in a voice that held neither admiration nor annoyance. “Vice Captain, if we start indiscriminately walking in circles, it will only tire us out. The duke said we were to meet him in a room underground, so we should all search for a path leading downwards. We can reach the goal separately and meet up afterwards.”

“I suppose that’s our only choice,” came the resigned reply, sounding awfully far away by this point. “Marielle, don’t panic, simply walk calmly and watch your step. Try to find a staircase.”

“All right,” I replied, lifting up my head.

“Don’t worry. We’ll definitely be reunited.”

His reassuring voice gave me great encouragement. I couldn’t let myself lose over this. I couldn’t simply wait there and cry, and nor could I keep trying to chase after him. It was time for Ambassador Nigel and I to keep going and search for a way down.

Ambassador Nigel, too, gently encouraged me. “You’re not too worn out, are you? If you start to struggle, I’ll give you a piggy-back ride.” This man was strict towards men, but to women he was indiscriminately chivalrous. It was rather impressive for such a ladykiller to be this consistent about it.

“Thank you,” I replied. “I’m fine for the time being.”

Without letting go of my hand, he went in front and proceeded slowly, keeping pace with me. At some point Lord Simeon and Lutin’s voices disappeared entirely, and only the two of us were reflected in the surrounding mirrors.

“I wonder if the duke is watching us from somewhere?” said Ambassador Nigel. “I’ve become rather curious to know all about the trickery he’s employed in this place.”

“You seem remarkably relaxed, Ambassador. Especially considering you’re a mere bystander who’s become embroiled in this situation.”

“I came here of my own accord, so I can’t exactly complain.”

He turned his head and looked at me with his honey-colored eyes, flashing an easygoing smile. Though his hair and eyes shone like the sun, his skin was a rich shade that reminded me of the earth. With no additional effort on his part, strength, good cheer and warm kindness filled the air. Even knowing that there was more to him than met the eye, I couldn’t help immediately feeling goodwill toward him.

“Besides,” he continued, “I could never let myself be pathetic enough to fall to pieces in front of a little lady like yourself.”

“Little?” This was quite a thing to be called, and I smiled somewhat awkwardly in response. I was not sure that my age or body justified such a term. “That reminds me. How old are you, Ambassador?”

“Hmm? Oh, I suppose I never told you. I’m twenty-eight.”

“Goodness,” I replied. “Lord Simeon will be turning twenty-eight the month after next. I hadn’t realized you were the same age.”

“Not quite. I was born in October, and I’ll be twenty-nine this year, so I’m closer to a year older than the Vice Captain. Incidentally, Arthur is fourteen.”

“Oh, I see. What about Lu— I mean, Earl Cialdini? Do you happen to know how old he is?”

“I don’t, I’m afraid. It once came up in conversation that he was born in winter, but when asked about his age, he changed the subject and didn’t tell me.”

So Ambassador Nigel doesn’t know either... From looking at Lutin I’d have guessed he was roughly in his mid-twenties, but there were plenty of people who looked younger or older than their age, so it was hard to be certain. “Still, if you’re turning twenty-nine this year, you’re older than I expected. You’re still single, aren’t you? Is there anyone you’re seeing on a more serious level, not only for casual dates?”

The array of mirrors was unsettling me, and I felt as though I might slowly go insane if we walked in silence, so I had consciously decided to proceed with this entertaining topic.

“Hmm,” he said vaguely, smiling and declining to answer.

I wasn’t about to let that reaction slip by. “That face says it all! Who is it? A long-distance lover in Easdale?”

He laughed. “Your eyes have begun to sparkle all of a sudden. Is it so enjoyable to hear about another person’s romantic life?”

“Yes, absolutely! When it comes to a gentleman as unique as you, Ambassador, I definitely want to know what sort of romance you’re having and with what sort of woman! For the sake of my reference material, you must tell me everything!”

“Reference material for what?”

For my original works, of course! This was Ambassador Nigel, whose very

existence felt as though it could form the basis of a story. His romantic situation would no doubt excite countless ladies.

“It’s a secret,” he continued. “And I wouldn’t exactly say we’re seeing each other.”

“Oh, is it unrequited love, then? I didn’t see you as that sort of person! What is she like? Oh, it must be a situation where if you try to court her, she’ll reject you!”

“I’d characterize it more as... If I’m imprudent enough to court her, she’ll punch me.”

“How unexpected! So she’s the muscular type! I take it she’s someone from the Burly Earldom, in that case? Incidentally, do you feel as though the ground is sloping somewhat?”

“Yes, I was about to say the same.”

We both looked down at our feet. I wasn’t sure when it had started, but by now the passageway was clearly sloping downwards.

“It’s one alternative to a staircase,” said the ambassador. “It must mean we’re closing in on our destination, at least.”

“Thank goodness. We’re finally nearing the finish line.” The knowledge that we were heading downwards made me feel cheerier all of a sudden. My footsteps sped up. “I just hope Lord Simeon is making similar progress.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. Earl Cialdini is with him—Lutin, the mysterious thief. This sort of thing should be exactly his cup of tea...provided the two of them don’t fall out and decide to go their separate ways.”

“Lord Simeon isn’t the kind of person who would forget what’s at stake.” *Probably*, I added internally. He and Lutin were like oil and water, but when there was a common goal they still worked together.

“Yes, knowing Lord Simeon, he would focus on the task at hand first of all, and then punch him later, once he has more freedom to maneuver.”

“Trust his fiancée to know him so well,” replied the ambassador.

In any case, rather than worrying about him, I, too, had to prioritize remaining

calm and escaping from this maze. I proceeded with renewed enthusiasm for that mission as the path sloped further and further downwards. I began to feel at risk of slipping on the smooth floor. "I wish the duke had at least included a handrail."

"The lack of a staircase makes his maliciousness clear enough."

"Indeed! Why must he—" But suddenly I cried out in shock as my foot slipped and I tumbled over. Ambassador Nigel tried to catch me, but he slipped as well, and together we began to coast downward in a big heap.

"What in the...!?" I shouted.

"A slide?" said the ambassador.

The mirrors had made it impossible to perceive the angle of the ground, but there had suddenly been a steep drop. As we slid further, we rapidly picked up speed. I forcibly held my glasses in place, but now my skirt flew up. No matter how fervently I tried to push it down with my other hand, my drawers were on full display.

"Don't loooooook!" I exclaimed.

"Rest assured, I won't."

We were falling so fast, and I was afraid there might not be a soft landing at the end. And, just as I had that thought, my body was practically flung out into mid-air. I yelped, unable to do a thing.

Ambassador Nigel made a gruff sound of exertion as he dexterously grabbed onto me, did one full rotation, and then landed. My heart felt ready to burst out of me; I put a hand on my chest to calm it. I barely managed to hold onto my glasses as they threatened to slide off the very tip of my nose.

"That was quite a shock," I said, my voice trembling.

The ambassador chuckled. "I thought it was rather good fun."

Still laughing, he stood up and put me down. I quickly put my glasses and skirt back into order and checked to ensure that nothing else looked out of place.

"Master," called out a voice as we dusted ourselves off. It was a voice I had not expected to encounter down here.

“Oh, Arthur,” said the ambassador, turning around. “I see you’re here as well.”

I turned as well. Not far from us stood a petite black-haired boy along with two more familiar faces. “Dario, and Joseph. You’re all here.”

Our three attendants had been brought to the finish line of the mirror maze.

The valets and driver had been made to wait in a room for servants until their masters’ tasks were complete, but this could not have been the waiting room in question. I looked around the underground space. It was empty, with stone walls that conveyed a very cold impression. It was vast enough that you could host a ball in here, albeit only a small one. The walls and thick columns supporting the ceiling had many candlesticks attached to them, all of which were lit, so the room wasn’t dark. There were also small windows lining the top edge for light and ventilation, so the atmosphere was not *too* dreary overall.

Neither did it feel claustrophobic, with its high atrium-like ceiling. Roughly halfway up the walls, a pathway with a handrail circled around the room, forming a structure that might be used to look down from above. There was neither a stage nor much in the way of audience seating, but it made the room somewhat resemble a theater nonetheless.

And what are those things hanging near the ceiling? Lined up across the room, from one side to the other, were metal objects that seemed to form some kind of barrier in the air. They did not appear to be decorative, but their purpose was unclear. *Could they be pillars, perhaps? No, they’re too thin for that, and there are too many of them...*

Joseph came over to me. “My lady, might I ask where the young master is?”

I lowered my gaze from the ceiling. Lord Simeon and Lutin were still nowhere to be seen in this room. “We lost sight of them along the way,” I replied. “Hopefully they should arrive shortly.”

“I can only wonder why even I was brought to this place.”

“I have no idea either, I’m afraid. We would have to ask the duke.”

Arthur handed Ambassador Nigel his cane and then took a long glance at Dario. “The servants who came to summon us looked at *him* and had some back

and forth about which ‘team’ he should be placed in.”

Both the ambassador and I cocked our heads, wondering what was meant by “team.”

“Perhaps it refers to a team of masters and a team of servants?” I suggested.

“But if that were the case, he’d simply have been placed in the servant team,” replied the ambassador.

“Hmm, true.”

The subject of discussion, Dario himself, stayed silent. Even if we had asked him, he probably wouldn’t have known the answer.

I looked around again, hoping that Lord Simeon and Lutin would arrive soon. Just when I did, another voice could be heard overhead.

“Goodness, you must have chosen the shortest route.” The duke appeared in the upper platform that might be termed the gallery with his wife by his side.

“Awfully good luck. You must have had a smooth journey indeed.”

I screwed up my face in response. It seemed the route we had taken was the fastest way to get here—but in exchange, it wasn’t a route we could simply walk along normally. *I wouldn’t call that “good luck” at all! If Ambassador Nigel hadn’t been there, I would have been injured at the end!*

The duke pulled his gaze away from us. “Ah, it seems the remaining two have arrived.”

I followed the duke’s gaze, and indeed, footsteps could be heard coming from that direction. They gradually came closer, and then the wall opened with a slight noise. What had appeared from this side to be an ordinary piece of the wall was in fact a door.

Lord Simeon came through and looked to me immediately. “Marielle! Are you all right?”

“Lord Simeon!”

Behind him, Lutin appeared as well. “Whew, finally. Thanks to the Vice Captain here, it took much longer than it needed to.”

“Don’t blame it on me!” Lord Simeon replied. “You’re the one who insisted on charging endlessly forward no matter what!”

“Perhaps you should stop complaining about me and be a little less blind to your own shortcomings, slowpoke!”

“How dare you say that when you were conspiring to lose sight of me!”

They had started arguing almost the moment they left the passageway. *No, from the looks of things, they’ve been at each other’s throats all the way along.* “Honestly,” I sighed.

“Dear oh dear, you’re like a pair of children.” Ambassador Nigel walked toward them with a wry smile. “Now’s not the time for your tomfoolery. Look at the situation we’re in.”

“Don’t you think I know that!?” exclaimed Lord Simeon, apparently rather irritated. Being in a confined space with Lutin must have been rather difficult for him. He brushed off Ambassador Nigel’s hand and walked over to me. In an effort to calm him down, I put on as gentle a smile as I could muster and waited for him.

Just then, an order came from the duke above us. “Stop right there.”

Lord Simeon froze in place, furrowed his brow and glared upwards. “What are you planning?”

“I’m merely telling you for your own sake. It would be dangerous to proceed any further.” He looked at me. “You too. Take a few steps back.”

“Oh...yes.” I did as ordered. The lines in Lord Simeon’s forehead deepened, and he began to do the exact opposite, stepping toward me anyway.

Suddenly, a clamorous sound reverberated above us. Lord Simeon looked up and immediately jumped backwards. Moments later, a group of solid iron bars fell exactly where he was standing, landing with an earth-shaking rumble.

“I warned you, didn’t I? It might help to listen.”

The duke’s scorn was soon drowned out by the continuing sound. Many more bars fell from above, in a line along the center of the room. They filled the spaces between the columns, splitting the underground room into two. Each

bar was about the height of two grown men, and it looked impossible to climb over them.

So that's what was hanging from the ceiling. The bars were connected by chains, and by following the chains with my eyes I could see there was also a mechanism for hoisting them back up again. *It's like something you'd find in a torture chamber. But that's not what this is...is it? This is a holiday home—built for pleasure! It can't have torture chambers like some sort of ancient castle...can it!?*

Lord Simeon grabbed onto the railings and shook them, quickly realizing he could not move them. “What do you think you’re doing!?”

The duke and duchess sat themselves down on a comfortable couch as though watching a play.

“Your two teams will each engage in a battle. If you can defeat the opponents I have in store for you, I’ll let you leave the room.”

The duke snapped his fingers and a door opened. Four men stepped into our section of the room. One glance made it clear they were not to be trifled with. Not only did they have strapping physiques, the look in their eyes was also shrewd and calculating. Immediately I knew they could not have been ordinary servants. They must have been men the duke employed for protection.

“Fight them using any methods of your choosing. They don’t have any weapons, so don’t worry about that.”

“Any methods...of our choosing...?” I instinctively drew my body closer to the railings—towards Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon put his arms through the bars and held me. “Your Grace!” he bellowed. “Surely this is going beyond a mere game! Such behavior is unforgivable even for you!”

But the duke just laughed. I had been separated from Lord Simeon, Lutin, and Ambassador Nigel, the three I’d expect to be able to count on as dependable warriors. I had no idea how I was going to make it through this.

Chapter Eleven

“You don’t have to howl like that,” said the duke. “She has the strongman on her side, so she’s not at such a great disadvantage. Besides, I told them to try and defeat you, not to make you all suffer.” He changed his tone, giving an order to his fighters. “Do whatever you like to the men, but keep your hands off that girl, all right?”

The fighters nodded obediently. Upon hearing that I wouldn’t be subjected to any violence, Lord Simeon’s arms loosened slightly.

Lutin walked up to the bars. “Hmm, those four men look rather tough, but... Well, do what you can, Dario.” From his tone, I wasn’t entirely sure how much encouragement he was giving.

Ambassador Nigel came over as well. “Arthur, you too are a member of the Knights of the Rose. Please do everything you can for the sake of the fair maiden.”

“Very well, master.”

It was much the same sort of exchange as I usually heard between them. Arthur agreed to his master’s order with a neutral air about him. *Still, he’s only fourteen, isn’t he? He’s about my height, and rather on the thin side. Surely there’s only so much he can do.*

Behind Dario and Arthur, Joseph cowered in fear. “Do I have to fight too!?” he stammered. “That’s... Those men, they’re... Surely, no one but the young master himself could...”

Joseph was thirty-eight years old and a father of two. He had worked steadily and reliably as a driver for years, but that was all. Neither Lord Simeon or myself would order him to fight. All I could do was pray that his turn would not come.

“Now then, I wonder who will win?” The duke, positioning himself as a spectator in the most literal sense, spoke with a casual tone that was so odious. *In practice, the only real fighter we have is Dario, isn’t it!?*

Needless to say, the four brawny men all focused their attention on Dario. They glared at him, and he glared back, as they closed the distance.

Suddenly, Dario stripped off his shirt. His monstrous muscles were revealed to all present. The opposing men were surprised for a moment, but were not to be outdone—they all took off their shirts as well, leaving their upper bodies exposed. They, too, were hulking slabs of meat. Muscle squared off against muscle.

Dario's forehead twitched. He let out a forceful grunt and struck a pose. His mighty biceps bulged from his arms like steep mountains.

But once again, the men were not to be outdone. They each struck a pose to show off their muscles as well. They bulged all over, and their muscles stood out even more as they caught the glow of the candlelight.

I leapt out of Lord Simeon's arms to lend Dario my support. "Dario! You've got them on the ropes! You're about to make them snap!"

"Is it that kind of battle!?" said Lord Simeon.

"You're so impressive! So big and hulking! They could never match you!" I called.

"Honestly," objected Lord Simeon, "you don't need to give him *that* sort of encouragement!"

Joseph shouted, "You have wings upon your back! You could fly!"

"You too, Joseph!?" groaned Lord Simeon.

"Go forth and open a new path!" Joseph continued in an optimistic tone.

"Where do you expect him to go!?" Lord Simeon replied.

In his seat above us, Duke Silvestre was once again clutching his chest. Just as it seemed like I could *hear* the men's muscles straining, a small shadow leapt out in front of me. With the speed of a swallow, Arthur darted past Dario and jumped at the frontmost of the four men. He kicked his opponent in the face before he had time to react. With Arthur's full force and body weight behind the blow, the man went flying.

When Arthur landed, he immediately sprang back up and used the

momentum to deliver a second blow. He moved so quickly, it took all my effort to follow him with my eyes. In an instant, the next fighter was sent hurtling through the air. Arthur lost none of his fire as he ran along the floor to his next target, letting out a mighty battle cry.

The two fighters still standing quickly changed tack. The showcase of their muscles was over, and now they were attempting to catch Arthur. But no matter how carefully they aimed for him, they simply couldn't pin down his small frame with any of their strikes. He nimbly avoided their punches and leapt up again. Now he was right in front of their faces. And, no matter how well honed these fighters were, an intense kick to the back of the neck was more than they could withstand.

After easily defeating all four of them, Arthur came to a stop at last. Standing amongst the face-down musclemen, the petite youngster calmly turned to look back at his master. "Is this to your satisfaction?"

It couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds. All I could do was take in the scene before me in a state of shock. Joseph, too, was dumbfounded, his mouth hanging open. Even Lord Simeon and Lutin looked shocked.

Ambassador Nigel alone looked unsurprised. He nodded and said, "Yes, that will do."

In a detached manner, Arthur came back and stood beside me.

"Arthur," I asked, "do you perhaps have some House Ivory blood in your veins?"

Considering he was such a slender boy and still not fully grown, he was incredibly strong. I had to know if he was a member of the Burly Earldom, who were practically synonymous with such preposterous feats.

He replied, "I'm from a lineage that has served the house of my master's uncle, Duke Shannon, for generations. To my knowledge, we have no blood connection to House Ivory."

"Oh, I see... Still, that was quite incredible. Dario, I think you can stop— Oh, a victory pose? Yes, of course, I see how that would be necessary."

We had achieved victory in a way that most of us would not have imagined at

all. Even Duke Silvestre seemed to have found this quite unexpected. “My word! I thought he was simply a child, but he turned out to be most impressive. He must be well trained.”

The ambassador’s face was nonchalant, but his tone was faintly boastful as he said, “Child or otherwise, he’s a member of my order.”

The Knights of the Rose, who protected Duke Shannon, were said to be a highly formidable group of warriors even in the present era. You would definitely not want them as your enemy.

“Most impressive, in any case. I was fairly entertained.” The duke gazed down at us with a look of satisfaction, and then turned his attention to the other side of the bars, where Lord Simeon, Lutin and Ambassador Nigel waited. “Now then, your turn. I hope you’ll put on an even better display than your underlings.”

A door opened on their side. The three gentlemen—and me—watched with a sense of ease this time, for whoever the new opponents might be, and however much pride they had in their strength, there was no way they could ever measure up. I felt as though we had already won.

However, when I saw the opponents that entered, my mouth fell open of its own accord once again. It was a trio of beautiful young women.

Lutin whistled rudely. The three women, who walked closer with smiles and graceful movements, exhibited bewitching faces and bodies that no man could help but be drawn to. Their dresses were simple, without much decoration, and with skirts that were fairly tight and did not hide the shapes of their figures. Their opened collars showed the deep décolletage of their ample bosoms, while their waists were surprisingly narrow and firm. Below that were luxurious curves that created an hourglass figure. Two had skirts with bold slits that showed off their legs as well.

Their allure wafted past the bars and reached our side. On any other occasion, my heart would have begun to race in a fangirl frenzy. They were such a beautiful fighting team that they might have even rivaled my beloved goddesses, the Three Flowers—the most esteemed courtesans of the long-established brothel Tarentule.

Ambassador Nigel's gaze turned, unsurprisingly, to their bosoms. "Yes, indeed. Very nice." *He really does have a fixation. Wait, when he told me I was "little" earlier, is that what he was referring to!?*

"Master," said Arthur, a hint of fear in his voice.

"Complimenting them is only good manners, Arthur. As a man, you must surely understand as well."

"I certainly do not."

"Don't lie. You're at the age when a young man has the *most* interest in carnal matters."

"I'd rather not be held to your standards, master."

Ignoring the cold glare from his valet, Ambassador Nigel awaited eagerly as the women approached.

Lutin, too, looked rather happy, a lewd expression on his face. "What a pain. I'd love to enjoy going a round or two with them, but it's slightly embarrassing to do it in front of everyone."

"Is it going to be *that* sort of fight!?" I asked.

"Oh... Isn't it?"

"Well I never!" I looked at Lord Simeon. *It's one thing for Lutin and the ambassador to fight these women—they could take as much pleasure in it as they liked—but Lord Simeon...*

One of the beauties approached him as well. He drew back as if a force was pushing him. His back collided with the bars in front of me.

"You won't beat her by running away," came a jeering voice from high above. A troubled look appeared on Lord Simeon's handsome face.

"L...Lord Simeon..."

When I called his name, he turned his head to look at me. I wished I could do something to help, but those bars kept me from him. Just like the last fight, this had to be handled by the ones on their side alone.

"Stop this!" said Lord Simeon, pushing the woman's hand aside when she

tried to touch him. But she continued her assault. She deliberately imposed her voluptuous figure on him and entwined her arms around his body. The pale white arms that surrounded him were far stronger than mine had been last night, and far more audacious.

“Get away!” Lord Simeon tried to push her off, but he moderated his strength because she was a woman. He was not the sort of person to use violence against a female opponent—he couldn’t simply ignore who it was and hurt her regardless. Even though she was forcefully gripping his arms and trying to rip them out of their sockets, as soon as she made a pained expression, he immediately flinched and all strength drained from him.

As his opposition weakened, the woman coiled around him even more ferociously. I clung to his back through the bars, and when my eyes met those of the woman, only a short distance away, she faced me with a triumphant smile. This left me slightly offended—no, *quite* offended, in fact. *The Three Flowers are infinitely superior after all. They don’t just have beauty and allure, but class as well! They’d never look at anyone as malevolently as that!*

“Lord Simeon, I’ve closed my eyes for now, so please, bring this to a climax quickly.”

“A climax?” he replied uncertainly.

“There are ways to leave a woman lying flat out and exhausted without using violence, aren’t there? I thought you might fight using those.”

“Again I ask you, where did you learn a thing like that!? And without even learning the nuts and bolts of it!”

“From your reaction every time I bring it up, it’s clear that you know what I mean.”

He ignored my last comment and turned back to the woman wrapped around him. “If you don’t get off of me right now, I promise you, it’s going to hurt. On this occasion, I’ll show you no mercy even if you are a woman.”

But his grip on her was still rather restrained.

Lutin laughed scornfully. In an intensely mocking tone he said, “How pathetic. As ever, you’re all bark and no bite.”

I glared at Lutin. *Pathetic!? He's a gentleman, that's all!* But at that moment, Lutin grabbed the arm and throat of the woman he was facing himself.

"Wait," I stammered. "If you do that..."

As her beautiful face distorted in anguish, he looked down at her calmly, a faint smile on his face. As I watched this shocking sight, wondering if he intended to kill her, a scream came from Ambassador Nigel's direction as well.

"There is a difference between kindness and gullibility, Vice Captain." The ambassador whirled the cane around in his hand. The woman lying passed out by his feet did not move a muscle.

"It's because he was raised as such a pampered little lad," said Lutin. "He must not be aware that there are filthy, vulgar women out there in the world." He flung the woman to the floor as if discarding her. As she coughed violently, her hands on the floor, he coldly turned his back on her and walked over to me.

What does he mean by "vulgar"? Is he referring to something other than the way they use their allure to help them in battle? I returned my gaze to the woman closest to me. While Lord Simeon was distracted, she had started to wrap her pale hands around his neck.

The very second I noticed that, I saw something shining in her lithe fingers—and it flew towards my eyes.

"Lord Simeon!" I cried out.

The same instant, he noticed and blocked the attack. Without another moment's delay, he pulled her down to the floor and subdued her.

When he checked the needle that had flown from a ring on her finger, he knitted his well-formed brows. "A poison needle?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't let them use anything as dangerous as that," said Lutin, looking up at the duke. "It must be a paralyzing or sleeping drug."

The duke said in a self-satisfied tone, "That was...a tolerable display."

He lifted his hand to give a signal, and the chains were hoisted with another clamorous noise. The bars returned to their original position close to the ceiling, and I leapt over to Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon embraced me in return and said my name, but he then sighed in a way that sounded somehow helpless. Lutin snorted quietly; he seemed to be both mocking Lord Simeon and expressing his own exasperation. Lord Simeon did not even glare back at him. Instead, he ushered me along, and together we walked towards the door that had opened.

When we returned to the world above ground, the sky had faded considerably. The sun set late at this time of year, but I could tell it was almost night time already. *We arrived at the duke's holiday home shortly before tea time. I suppose all the business we've been involved in since then took quite a while.*

"You may rest for now while dinner is prepared," said Duke Silvestre. Though his words and tone suggested it was a generous offer, in practice it meant that he still did not intend to let us go free. *Will he force us to stay the night here?* I suppressed the urge to sigh and asked if I could get changed.

I borrowed Duchess Christine's dressing room and changed back into my own dress. I also asked the maids to remove my makeup. Although I was used to crafting a face that transformed me almost into a different person, this was far too heavy and didn't suit me at all. Back in the sort of light makeup I had worn to begin with, I was able to look at my own face in the mirror once more, which calmed and reassured me.

As the duchess watched the maids put the dress away, she asked, "Didn't you like it? I can't wear it anymore, so you could have worn it home and kept it."

"It's not so much a case of whether I like it or not," I replied. "It simply doesn't suit me."

"The makeup we put on you earlier was designed to make it impossible to recognize you. I'm sure if we applied it properly, the dress would suit you better."

Despite her kind efforts, I politely declined. For whatever reason, I just did not want to wear that dress again.

"I suppose it makes sense. He does seem to prefer pure and innocent girls. That dress is somewhat different from that."

She spoke without even a hint of having taken offense. I was often looked down upon by ladies from higher-ranking houses. Since I got engaged to Lord Simeon, I had been inundated with sneering and sarcastic comments. And yet, Duchess Christine had treated me favorably all along. Despite my doubts about how far I could trust that, I still held onto some hopes.

Hesitating, I began, “Duchess Christine, I don’t suppose I could ask you to have a word with the duke on our behalf, perhaps? We’ve already enjoyed his company for quite some time today. If possible, I would really like to go home tonight.”

I had stayed out the night before as well, and this was, of all things, the night before my wedding. I had wanted to spend it in a more quiet and solemn fashion. If I could at least leave now, it wouldn’t have been so bad.

“Indeed,” said the duchess, appearing thoughtful. “In that case, I wonder if you might be able to assist me?”

I leaned forward. *This is promising!* “What can I help you with?”

“Something quite simple. I’ve heard you’re very well-informed. You know all sorts of secrets about the people in society, isn’t that right?”

I wavered. “I wouldn’t say that. I hardly even have any friends.”

“Could you tell me something I can use against Marquess Coubertin’s wife? Some weakness I can target. She’s been playing quite a game of tug-of-war with me, and I’m sick of her treating me with such enmity. I’d like to chase her out of society. Could you help me with that, perhaps?”

Though she kept her face and voice placid, her words were rather frightening. Truly, she was not the kind of person she appeared to be.

When I did not immediately reply, she added, “If you tell me a secret I can use, I’ll put in a good word with my husband. Simple, wouldn’t you say? For you, it’s a very straightforward trade with no disadvantage at all. So tell me.”

I tightly squeezed my hands together in my lap. I can’t say I didn’t have a moment of indecision. This was not entirely a simple choice. There was a small part of me that really wanted to choose the easy option—the one that was most convenient for me.

But I couldn't do it.

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "I'm afraid I don't have any information like that."

"Oh, is that so? What a pity."

The duchess did not push any further. She retreated easily and left the room without even a look back over her shoulder. As I watched her go, my shoulders slumped. *I'm sorry, Your Highness. I know you meant for us to turn the duchess against the duke, but I just couldn't manage it.*

Her request was one I simply couldn't honor. My information gathering was not for the sake of harming anyone. It was purely so that I could learn about all sorts of life stories and use them as a reference for my writing. That was why I couldn't start spreading gossip myself or disclosing secrets to anyone.

If it had been to protect the duchess herself, or even to support her in a challenging conflict, I'd have thought about it much harder. But there was already quite a power imbalance between her and Marchioness Coubertin—and Duchess Christine was in the stronger position. The marchioness was indeed showing some opposition to her, but she couldn't challenge her in any real sense, and was only acting as her rival to the extent that their ranks allowed. She certainly had not done anything bad enough to deserve being chased out of society.

No matter what happened, I couldn't behave in a way that sacrificed someone else for my own benefit.

I held my head up with dignity and told myself not to be dejected. It was a disappointing result, but I had made the right choice. I was sure that Lord Simeon also wouldn't have considered trying to save ourselves by selling out somebody else either. In fact, if I had done it, I was sure he'd have scolded me for it.

So this was fine. It wasn't as though I'd gained any new problems—I was in the same place I had started.

All we had to do was entertain the duke long enough for him to be satisfied.

I stood up and returned to the room we had started in, where a butler immediately came to summon us to dinner. We all moved to the dining room. I

was nervous that Duke Silvestre might involve us in one of his games here as well, but the dinner table appeared perfectly normal. We all sat comfortably and aperitifs were poured into everyone's glasses.

"I'd rather not," said Lord Simeon, refusing the aperitif and bringing his water glass closer instead.

The duke raised an objection. "Do you not intend to participate in the toast?"

"I'll use this instead." Lord Simeon picked up the water glass.

The duke snorted. "Toasting with water? Oh no, that won't do. That will spoil the fun. Even if you can't stand alcohol, surely you can join for one glass?"

Creases appeared on Lord Simeon's brow. As he hesitated, unsure of how to respond, the servant waiting on us quickly filled his other glass. With a look of resignation, Lord Simeon put down his water glass and picked that up instead.

The toast was made, and he put the glass down after taking only a tiny mouthful.

"Drink it all," came the order from the duke.

Lord Simeon scowled at him. "My apologies, but I have a low alcohol tolerance. It will lead me to behave improperly."

"I don't mind. Alcohol is supposed to get you drunk, and this is a casual gathering. Feel free to enjoy yourself without putting on airs."

Lord Simeon's face became even more pained. Again he said nothing. Beside him, I watched anxiously.

I had been with Lord Simeon for close to a year, and in that time I had never seen him drink alcohol. He was often attending to His Highness, and naturally he wouldn't drink if he was on duty. However, he also declined whenever he ate dinner with my family, and even in his own home. Turning down even an aperitif suggested that he really could not tolerate any alcohol at all.

Perhaps it had an adverse effect on his constitution. There were people whose bodies could not cope with specific foods or drinks—even putting them to their lips would make them pass out. *Perhaps alcohol is poisonous to Lord Simeon. If so, drinking the whole glass could be exceptionally dangerous.*

“Excuse me, but Your Grace—” I began, ready to ask if an exception could be made.

But the duke spoke over me, preempting my concern. “It’s not that you *can’t* drink it. Isn’t that right? I’m sure it’s quite safe for you.”

Lord Simeon did not answer. However, the duke’s tone suggested that he knew this for certain. *Does the duke know the reason why Lord Simeon never drinks alcohol?*

“If you don’t drink it,” the duke added with a smile, “I won’t let you leave. This falls under the rules of the game. Now, drink it. The entire glass in one gulp.”

All eyes were on Lord Simeon. He let out a soft breath. For a moment, his light blue eyes turned toward me. What was the emotion that appeared in them? He seemed very anxious somehow.

He lifted up the glass once more, brought it to his lips, and quietly drained it. I held my breath and watched.

After a pause I said, “Lord Simeon, are all you all right?”

He put down the glass, then did not move a muscle except to close his eyes. He sat there, frozen. His expression was not one of pain or distress, nor had his breathing become violent at all, but it scared me that he remained still for so long.

“Lord Simeon, are you unwell? How do you feel?”

“Am I...unwell?” He spoke with a deep voice. His eyes remained closed and only his lips moved. “You’re asking...how I feel?”

“W-well, yes. You don’t feel pain anywhere? You aren’t nauseous?”

“I feel... I feel...” Slowly his eyelids rose up. He stared at me with a torpid gaze. “Atrocious.”

“Atrocious!? I knew it. It really doesn’t agree with you.” I reflexively stood up. Lord Simeon suddenly put his arm around me and pulled me closer to him, knocking my chair into the table with a cacophonous sound. His glass fell over as well.

Ignoring that, he lifted me into his lap. “Of course I feel atrocious!” he

shouted, holding me in his arms. “How can I enjoy my evening under these circumstances!?”

For a moment I didn’t understand what had happened. *Why is Lord Simeon acting this way in front of everyone?* It was unthinkable behavior in a formal dinner setting, especially one hosted by a person of superior social rank. “Lord Simeon!” I stammered.

“What part of this am I supposed to feel good about? Are *you* capable of enjoying this!?”

“N-no, I definitely—”

“Yeah, knowing you, you’d find a way to enjoy it. Wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, you always find *something* to enjoy. I could rack my brains for hours and I’d still be no match for your ‘fangirling.’ I think so hard about how to make you happy, but all I can ever think of are ordinary things like shopping and going to the theater! I didn’t even know what sort of flowers you like until your brother told me. And you look scornfully at me and find fun on your own. You don’t need me at all.”

“That’s not true!” Even as he embraced me so tightly that it hurt, I could not allow these words to go without comment. “I have the most fun when you’re with me, Lord Simeon! Nothing is more enjoyable than looking at you!”

“Because you ‘fangirl’ over me? Because I’m a ‘brutal black-hearted military officer’ and so forth!?”

“No! Well, I can’t say there isn’t *some* element of that. That’s important to me too, of course. But I know that in reality you’re a kind person. It’s just the image you present at first glance. The real Lord Simeon is—”

“Exactly! I’m neither brutal nor black-hearted! I am—”

He started moving me around again so roughly that I felt I might faint. Then, before I knew it, I was back in my chair, and for some reason Lord Simeon was on his knees before me.

He took my hand in the same manner a knight would when swearing fealty. “I am...a servant of love!”

Oh no! Lord Simeon is COMPLETELY BROKEN!

I could hear bursts of laughter. The duke had put his elbows on the table and was covering his face with interlocked hands. His shoulders were shaking and he was unable to conceal his mirth.

He knew, didn't he? He made Lord Simeon drink knowing that this would happen to him!

As Lord Simeon rubbed his cheek against my hand, I glared at the duke. However, rather than restraining himself, he laughed even more audibly.

Lutin chuckled as well, finding it very amusing. "So he's that kind of drunk, is he? Astounding."

Emptying his own glass, Ambassador Nigel also smiled wryly. "I did think it was a little strong for an aperitif, but I'd never have expected him to be so affected by one glass. No wonder he doesn't drink."

I sullenly looked around at everyone, then picked up the overturned glass and thrust it at the servant waiting on us. After a moment's surprise, he poured in more of the aperitif. I drank it in one gulp, then vigorously slammed the glass down on the table.

I couldn't tell if I was drunk or not. I didn't feel any particular change.

"Lord Simeon!" I said, strongly gripping his hand in return as he still kneeled on the floor. Hand in hand, we gazed into each other's eyes. "A servant of love? How wonderful! There is no better fuel for my fangirl fire! That you appear so villainous but you're so steadfastly pure on the inside...I cannot get enough of it! For the black-hearted military officer to be such a soppy romantic is the sort of twist I dream about. It makes you doubly delicious! This food is delicious, too. Here, Lord Simeon, have a mouthful."

"Your lips would be far more delicious," he replied.

"Oh my, that amorous gaze. It makes me want to gobble you up! Here, have another bite."

"I want to gobble you up as well," he slurred. "Do you understand how much I've endured? When the warmth and softness of the one I love are so close, it

has the power to smash all sense of reason into tiny pieces. But whenever I lost my resolve, I looked at your modest bosom and restrained myself. I told myself it would be a crime to lay a hand on someone who's still a child."

"For one thing, I am not a child, and for another, *my deepest apologies* for having such a modest bosom! Here, have some more! And more!"

He gulped it down. "Shouldn't you also eat some—" I spooned more in and he swallowed again.

Even though it was normally such a source of embarrassment for him, he obediently opened his mouth like a chick being fed by its mother. Alcohol was terrifying indeed. I was intentionally making a display of our flirting in front of the duke and the others present.

"Hehe, I think you're the one who's like a child, Lord Simeon. You're so cute. My adorable little boy."

"Gah!" cried Lutin, his face distorting in irritation. "You've put me off my food."

Heh. Victory.

As I patted Lord Simeon, who was still on his knees, I looked around with a triumphant expression. *If he has to be drunk, then we're going to enjoy it. So he's a bad drunk, is he? Watch to your heart's content!*

Duke Silvestre was the one who had said that this was a casual gathering, and that we should feel free to enjoy ourselves without putting on airs. So why not take advantage of that and have a good time?

In the face of my defiance, the duke's gaze was surprisingly lacking in venom. All he said was, "There's a lid for every pot." *Well excuse me!*

Chapter Twelve

In the end, we all stayed the night at the duke's holiday home. The duke didn't give us permission to leave, but beyond that, Lord Simeon fell asleep, so we couldn't have gone home either way. I asked the duke to at least allow Joseph to go home temporarily, but of course he did not allow this. Instead, the duke sent messengers of his own to each of our houses.

I couldn't fault his hospitality, but we were essentially being held prisoner. We couldn't even ask our own families for assistance, let alone Prince Severin. *I'm sure everyone is quite angry with us. They must be wondering what we're doing on such an important day. I hope they'll forgive us later when we explain.*

Lutin and the ambassador helped me carry Lord Simeon to the guest room that had been prepared for him. To make him more comfortable, I took off his jacket and waistcoat and untied his cravat, then I gently placed the covers over him.

Hearing his peaceful breathing as he slept, I let out a sigh of relief, then stroked his silky blond hair. I was glad that drinking didn't make him ill, at least.

"He's sleeping like a baby," said Lutin. "Not a phrase I'd normally associate with the so-called Demon Vice Captain." He didn't speak with his usual mocking tone. Rather, he seemed utterly stunned. As such, I didn't feel especially annoyed.

I looked up at him.

"Marielle," he said, "do your feelings remain unchanged? Today you saw the Vice Captain in rather a pathetic state."

"There was nothing pathetic about it."

"You must be joking."

Without asking, he pulled up a chair and sat nearby. Ambassador Nigel stayed standing, but listened to our conversation without any indication that he was going to leave.

Lutin added, "If it weren't for me, it would have taken him even longer to get through the mirror maze. Then, in the underground room, he stayed his hand, refusing to fight that woman even when it was clear at a glance that she was dangerous. And then, lastly, that display at dinner. Even I felt somehow disillusioned."

He spoke as if he was quite aggravated by this. It gave me an odd feeling. *Lutin always makes fun of Lord Simeon and treats him like a fool, so why is he reacting this way? Is it because, deep inside, he actually admits that Lord Simeon is a worthy opponent?* If he was an opponent he saw as inconsequential, it wouldn't matter what sort of pathetic display he put on. It seemed the very reason Lutin didn't want to acknowledge Lord Simeon's weakness was *because* he saw him as a legitimate rival.

Lutin's blue eyes, which had been watching Lord Simeon's sleeping face, turned to me with a quizzical look. "What are you smiling about?"

I silently shook my head.

"You should abandon him," he said. "You deserve better. You should come with me to Lavia right away. Surely you see now that he's not the dashing man he appears to be on the surface?"

"He is incredibly dashing. You are as well. And even Ambassador Nigel."

I looked up at the ambassador, and he laughed. "'Even' me?"

I chuckled too, then continued. "Prince Severin is dashing as well, no doubt about that, and there are plenty of other men who are every bit as impressive. The world is full of wonderful gentlemen. But that alone is not enough to make me love them. In fact, I love him *because* I know about both his good and bad sides." I stroked Lord Simeon's hair once more. "I like him even when he's the very opposite of dashing. In fact, his awkward and embarrassing qualities are very precious to me. I'm a flawed individual as well, so I can't demand perfection from other people. I love Lord Simeon just the way he is."

Lutin rested his chin in his hands and sighed. "I wonder why you don't feel that way about me. If you'd met me before the Vice Captain, would you have loved me?"

“I have a sense that it’s not about who I met first... But this also makes me want to ask you something. Do you really have feelings for me?”

“I’ve said so all along, haven’t I? Do you still not believe me?”

“I just don’t understand why.”

He had shown a positive attitude towards me ever since we first met. However, his early efforts to win my favor were part of his real mission to observe Lord Simeon’s character. If he reeled me in, he would reel Lord Simeon in at the same time, and that was why he got close to me. I believed that was all it was.

He had continued to make advances when we met after that, but I never believed that his reasons for courting me were down to genuine passion on his part. There had been nothing so remarkable about our exchanges, and I was not exactly enchanting enough for him to fall in love at first sight. So why would he have such feelings if nothing in particular had triggered them? No matter how many sweet nothings he whispered to me, I could never help feeling that they were simply shameless words that slid right past me.

“Surely nothing has happened between the two of us that could lead to romance blossoming?”

“What a sad thing to say,” he replied. “You’re cruel, and you don’t even realize it.” Even while chiding me, he smiled as ever.

“What? But...” I was lost for words.

Ambassador Nigel jumped into the conversation in my hour of need. “You must realize you can’t blame her alone. You only reap what you sow, don’t you? Your true feelings are difficult to read. It’s a bad habit, continually hiding them in a shroud of sarcasm and jokes. I know you’re in a position that forces you to do that, but at the very least you should have shown a more honest side of yourself in front of the woman you love. If you only ever wear the same smile regardless of what you’re saying, she won’t know how to take it. It’s not the sort of attitude that earns much trust.”

Lutin smiled bitterly. “That is...painfully accurate.” Instead of adding anything further, he took a single breath and stood.

He turned and began to leave, but I decided to ask something that had been bothering me all along. “When I ran away, why did you help me? Were you lying when you said you weren’t going to let me go?”

Lutin stopped and looked back over his shoulder at me. “No, that was entirely true.” He was smiling again as usual. Whether it was a sarcastic smile, an amused smile, or a bold smile, he was *always* smiling. He hid everything behind a smile. “I told you, I’m always serious toward you. Whatever I tell you is the truth, even if it doesn’t seem like it.”



“Then...why?”

“A gamble, I suppose.” Lutin rested his hand on his hip and looked at the ceiling. “You seemed to be wavering. I thought if I kept applying pressure, it might finally work.”

I stared at him.

“As long as you didn’t run away, I planned to keep you with me. You’re not like other ladies, who would simply cry and wait to be rescued, unable to do anything on their own. I knew that if you really weren’t happy being held by me, you would try to escape somehow. So, if you didn’t, I thought it might mean you harbored some sort of interest in me.” He turned his head to look at me again. “But alas, you ran away after all. I can’t say I was truly surprised.”

After a pause, he continued.

“You asked about the reason for my feelings. I understand the question. Admittedly, you’re not a stunning beauty or an alluring vixen. You have a slightly unusual personality, but otherwise you’re an average young lady through and through.” He made these very frank statements without any reserve. “The difference is that you’re incredibly earnest and focused on your goals. If you like something, you make it absolutely clear that you like it. Even if you’re mocked for it, you continue going straight ahead along the path you believe in. Think about the time I tricked you by hiding the true identity of the ‘young lady’ from House Montagnier. Even when it was of no benefit to you whatsoever, you still did your very best to help him. You never hesitate or veer from your own course. You maintain focus to such an extent that I occasionally wonder if you’re entirely right in the head. And that, to me, is simply dazzling.”

The smile he showed at the very end did not feel like a deception. It was full of kindness, yet hinted at pain in his heart.

At that point, Lutin stopped and left the room without another word. I felt slightly dejected, worrying that I might have said something unkind to him.

I cast my eyes downward, and suddenly I felt a warm weight on my head. Ambassador Nigel was gently stroking it. “He likes how straightforwardly earnest you are. That makes sense. It must seem unimaginable for someone

who lives like he does. However, it was already determined from the beginning that his heart would be broken. If you've earnestly fallen in love with another man, there's nothing to be done about it."

"Yes," I replied after a moment's pause, "that's true."

It might be rude to say this about Lutin when he had told me he had feelings for me, but I found his taste awfully strange. *He should have fallen in love with a girl who was focused more on him.*

Ambassador Nigel left the room too. I lay down beside Lord Simeon and drew close to his body heat.

Love is something that arrives unexpectedly. It's not something you're aware of as it happens. Before you even notice, your heart has been stolen and there's nothing you can do about it.

Yes, that's how it happened, I thought as I looked at Lord Simeon. I had never expected to fall so deeply in love with him. I'd initially believed it was a marriage of convenience. I had steeled myself for a relationship that would be purely formal and duty-bound.

Given my noble upbringing, I accepted that as a matter of course. I told myself that his brutal outward appearance, which I adored so much, was enough to make me happy. I did not expect any love to bloom between us. I couldn't hope for that—I knew that if I did, it would only have ended in tears. So instead, I decided to go on seeking that sweet thrill only in the world of books. And yet, despite my best intentions, my heart was charmed by him, and I fell deeply and irrevocably in love. If Lord Simeon hadn't felt the same, it would have been a sad tale of unrequited love.

The fact that love is beyond our control can lead to bittersweet stories indeed. Everyone's read a tale or two that depicts a tragic lost love, or a character who sacrifices themselves on the altar of their hidden feelings. Not to mention the endless number of supporting characters whose own feelings were secretly dashed to pieces in the shadow of the main couple and the tempestuous romance that brings them together.

I couldn't love two men at the same time. There were such things as feelings that drew someone to me that I could not return. Sadly, there was nothing I

could do about that.

Lord Simeon's sleeping face was so pretty. It lacked any masculine sternness, but neither was it so feminine that it felt soft. His features had just the right amount of class and elegance. Lying there, he truly looked like Prince Charming from a storybook. I could even believe he had been placed under a witch's curse. *My beloved prince continues to sleep soundly. When morning comes, the curse will be broken and I'll see his striking light blue eyes again, won't I?*

I kissed him as if to cast a spell of my own, then quietly left the room.

And then came the morning.

Morning already. *The morning.* It had arrived all too quickly.

Outside the window, the sky was pleasantly clear and bright. The perfect sky stretching out before me was a hue that resembled Lord Simeon's eyes. The flowers in the garden still had their evening dew and gave off a gentle damp fragrance. The grass was a vivid shade of green, and little birds chirped loudly nearby. It was the start of a glorious day. I could not imagine a more beautiful morning for the bells of joy to be rung.

I should have been looking out at it with nothing but pure happiness in my heart. I should have been eating one last breakfast with my family, then heading to the ceremony. This morning, which should have been a hectic whirlwind of delight, I was instead spending here at Duke Silvestre's holiday home.

I still couldn't leave. I wondered what sort of faces my family, and Lord Simeon's, were making right now. It was beyond the realms of a normal scolding.

Will we at least make it in time for the start of the ceremony? If we don't, will we need to postpone it?

It wasn't as though we'd never be able to get married for our entire lives, but even so, I was thoroughly crestfallen. *Will today forever be a sad memory for us?*

Looking out at the splendid scenery, I heaved a deep sigh. Just then, one of the duke's maids entered. "The master is calling you. He says he would like to

discuss something before breakfast.”

What is it this time? I couldn’t suppress the hope that he would finally let us leave. At the same time, a voice inside me refused to even consider it. *As if the duke would let us go that easily.*

The maid led me to the blue and white room from yesterday. I assumed that everyone would be gathered for this discussion, but the duke was alone in the room. The moment I realized that, I became unable to move my legs. I stood frozen at the entrance, unable to go forwards or backwards. Just like yesterday, the duke sat in front of the large clock and wore a smile that did not reach beyond his lips.

“Relax,” he said, “all I want to do is talk. You were told as much, I hope.”

I hesitated before replying. “What is it you want to talk about?”

This did not sound like the start of a conversation about allowing us to leave. I was sure that another upsetting surprise was in store. Part of me felt weary, wanting to say, *I knew it...* Meanwhile, another part of me wanted to flip a table over and shout, *That’s enough! Stop it already!*

“We can’t start if you’re standing all the way over there. Come here and sit down.” The duke pointed to a chair close to him.

Silently telling myself to stop trembling, I entered the room and sat down as commanded. I confronted the duke with my back as straight as I could manage.

I had been able to stay strong when I was with Lord Simeon and the others, but facing him one-on-one like this was far scarier. Despite having similar features to Prince Severin and His Majesty the King, the duke did not in any way convey the same sort of buoyant impression. It was hard to read any of the thoughts behind his gray eyes, and when our gazes met, an anxiousness rose up in me that I couldn’t explain.

Like the moonlight wavering on the water’s surface. The impression I’d formed of him before still held true. He appeared to be there, but any efforts to grasp onto him were futile. Understanding him seemed impossible.

“So...what do you want to talk about?” I asked.

The clock behind him was just turning seven. Three hours until the ceremony was planned to start. I pushed down my annoyance as resolutely as I could.

“I have a question for you,” he replied. “That man... Are you still just as determined to marry him?”

It was much the same question as Lutin had asked me the night before. I looked back at him with a forceful gaze. “Of course.”

“His skills are praised to the high heavens, and his beautiful good looks are popular with the ladies. He’s also the heir to a prestigious earldom. No doubt you were satisfied with him as a future husband—I can imagine you had no cause for complaint. However, this incident should have given you greater awareness. Can you still adore that man unconditionally now that you’ve been shown he is not the fine, upstanding gentleman you thought he was?”

Now the duke is saying this as well? I shook my head. “For me, there is still no problem at all. I’ve never been the type of person who demands perfection of others. Humans are imperfect creatures. I’m not perfect, and neither are you, Your Grace. Everyone has flaws, and that’s exactly why there’s meaning in how people choose to live their lives.”

Regardless of who asked me this question, my answer would not change. It was a fundamental belief of mine that would never be shaken. The reason I had observed so many people and their unique lifestyles, and written stories to depict them, was because this was a source of endless smiles and tears. If anyone existed who was completely perfect, I doubted there would be any of that. The reason people struggle and put in such effort in their lives is because they don’t measure up. Seeing people do that is what truly moves the heart.

“Sometimes they struggle disgracefully, or even crawl on the ground, but they never give up—they always get back on their feet. I love watching humans live their lives with every ounce of their being.”

“So, to win the seat of countess, you’ll close your eyes to everything else, including your husband’s flaws? Is that it?”

I ignored his mockery. *If he thinks that’s enough to anger me, he is sorely mistaken. I’ve heard an endless stream of such comments since I got engaged to Lord Simeon. If he believes I’m merely aiming for a higher social status, let him*

believe that.

Paying no mind to my lack of reaction, the duke went on. “But...what if you could earn an even *higher* status?”

This question sounded like more than a mere jibe. I furrowed my brow without meaning to. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean what I said. There might be a position open to you that’s even higher than that of an earl’s wife. If you could sit in a place higher than every other lady in the kingdom...what would you do?”

Higher than every other lady? There was only one thing he could mean by that. “In no way, shape or form is that possible.”

“*Au contraire*. It is quite possible. I know you’re aware of His Highness’s situation, and that his parents—Her Majesty the Queen, in particular—have been going to great lengths to find him a suitable bride.”

I paused. “Yes.”

“His Highness is a man of complicated tastes. In addition, he’s experienced some rather bad luck. He’s been entirely unable to find a match who presents herself as the right choice.”

I made a vague sound of affirmation in response. This was entirely true. I’d heard from his sisters, the princesses, that he had experienced a string of failed romances, and I had also witnessed it firsthand. His Highness was sadly a rather pathetic figure.

But what does that have to do with me?

He continued, “His mother could force him to fulfill his duty by marrying him off to some princess or other, but that will leave the future somewhat uncertain. For the kingdom’s sake as much as anything else, His Highness’s heart should be satisfied to as great an extent as possible. However, he will turn twenty-eight this year, and we don’t have the luxury of waiting forever. What I’ve heard over and over again in discussions with the queen is that we must find him a wife as soon as possible.”

“I...see.”

“It was during one such discussion that I was asked about you. Her Majesty is aware that you have recently become very close to His Highness. He seems to like you not only because you’re the fiancée of his trusted confidant, but because he gets on well with you on a personal level. You are fully open with one another, not hesitating to criticize or even argue. There has never been another woman that His Highness treated this way other than his sisters. Do you imagine that this wouldn’t raise Her Majesty’s hopes?”

I was struck silent. Even though this could not have been anything but a joke, I found myself unable to laugh. Anxiety crept up my body.

I knew that Her Majesty frequently asked her relatives for advice about His Highness’s marriage prospects. I also knew that she was considering looking the other way even if the potential match was not from a suitably prestigious family. By this point, absolutely anyone would do—or, if not that, she was at least prepared to compromise rather a lot.

Still, for *me* to be put forward as a candidate? Though perhaps the matter hadn’t quite progressed that far yet.

“The fact that you have a fiancé is not a problem of any real note,” said the duke. “After all, you’re not married yet. It’s common enough for engagements to be broken and new connections to be formed.”

“But...my wedding is today. It’s too late to be resetting everything to square one.”

“You’re not married yet,” the duke repeated. His tone did not permit any rebuttal, and I fell silent again. “Of course, ordinarily His Highness would never steal the fiancée of his subordinate—of his best friend. Even if he had a favorable view of you, he would keep that to himself and give up any hope. However, if he heard that his friend’s fiancée had changed her mind after seeing said friend in an overly pathetic state... If her feelings had cooled, and the engagement had been broken off for that reason... What then? Don’t you think that His Highness, and even the jilted fiancé himself, might accept it?”

I simply stared at him, unable to move.

“We also had a rather influential witness in the form of the ambassador, Nigel Shannon. I’ve made sure the circumstances will be more than clear enough for

society at large, and even the gentlemen concerned, to readily accept them. All that remains is your response. Think of it not as an inquiry as to your thoughts, but as an order. Now, answer me.”

His gray eyes stared at me intently, demanding a reply. Like an optical illusion, I could practically see the invisible pressure that was about to break me to pieces. My throat dried up. I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I swallowed several times, breathed in and out repeatedly, and voicelessly repeated my true love’s name with my trembling lips.

“Lord Simeon...are you awake?”

I spoke softly through the door and heard rustling inside.

“I’m coming in,” I said, and then opened the door.

Lord Simeon was up already. He was sitting on the bed with his back to me, and did not turn around when I entered. His broad shoulders were slumped feebly. Even his back lacked its usual imposing strength.

“Lord Simeon?”

Even when I called his name, he didn’t move. I walked around the bed and stood in front of him.

His gaze, which always greeted me so kindly, was cast down at his feet. *Why isn’t he looking at me? Is he...afraid?* His pale, beautiful face was a picture of anxiety.

I wondered what to do. Scold him? Encourage him? Soothe him? Tell him to pull himself together?

I kneeled down on the floor and looked up at his face from below. “Lord Simeon, how are you feeling? Are you ill at all?”

He replied silently with a small shake of the head. *Can I take this as reassurance that he doesn’t have a hangover?*

“In that case, let’s have breakfast. You can’t start the day without eating properly. When your stomach is settled, you’ll feel right as rain.”

Still nothing.

“Or have you finally given up? We’ve had nothing but endless problems, so you no longer want to marry me?”

At last he spoke. “Surely *you’re* the one who no longer wants to marry *me*?” His tone was unexpectedly firm, but he still did not meet my eyes. He continued to stare at the floor. “You must be thoroughly disillusioned after being exposed to me in such an awful state of drunkenness.”

“You remember that?” I replied.

His pallid cheeks changed color slightly. *So he can recall everything, even when he was at the height of drunkenness.* I wondered which was better—that, or not recalling a thing?

“It’s not just my drunken behavior,” said Lord Simeon. “It’s how utterly useless I was yesterday as well. You’ve always looked at me with such sparkling eyes, but now you’ve come to see what a disgraceful man I am. I wished so badly to be a fine enough person that I would never shatter your illusions. When I think about how disappointed you must be... How much contempt you must have for me... I can’t help thinking you must hate me now.” He wrung his hands together.

I... He... Unable to bear it any longer, I covered my face with my hands. “I can’t...”

“You can’t!?” His voice suddenly took on a very different tone.

“It’s too painful...”

“Too painful!?” An even more tragic and desperate voice.

I shook my head and gazed at him as the feeling welled up inside me. “I love it...”

Suddenly he seemed to regain his presence of mind. He took on a very straight face, and his light blue eyes stared back at me with suspicion. “I don’t follow.”

Writhing in agony, I cried out, “Lord Simeon, you are so cute I simply cannot *stand* it! My word, it’s impossible, it’s too much—the Demon Vice Captain shaking in fear, afraid that I hate him! It’s so superlatively sweet and adorable, I

can't take it, it's too painful, my heart is aching and I'm going to die!"

Lord Simeon silently closed his eyes. His fists quivered. I could tell that he was shaking for a different reason than before.

He took a single large breath, then his eyes shot open in a rage. "I meant what I was saying! I was being entirely serious!"

"So was I!"

"How can you try to claim such a thing!? What about that was any different from your usual carefree joviality!?"

"That's always serious too! I'm serious in my fangirling over you! Even when you're being awkward instead of dashing, even when you're down in the dumps, I fangirl over it and dearly love it!"

His words caught in his throat. His angry face suddenly lost all its menace and the color of his cheeks deepened even further.

I chuckled softly. "Why are gentlemen so fixated on their image? Lutin and the duke made the same assumptions. They both asked me about it, supposing that my feelings had changed—that I had become disillusioned with you. But why would I change my mind so decisively based on the events of only one day? And you, Lord Simeon... Haven't I told you before that it's not only your dashing and impressive qualities that I like? Do you honestly believe it's a problem for you to show even the slightest flaw?"

He did not interject, so I continued.

"You're always so impeccable, so don't you think it's acceptable to be less than impeccable on occasion? Why do you treat that as a terrible failure? It happens to everyone."

"But it *is* a terrible failure," he replied, his face screwing up painfully. "To exhibit such...drunken foolishness. And in front of you, no less!"

I'm sure he was feeling quite embarrassed and pathetic. I could very much relate to his desire to avoid showing himself in such a shameful state in front of the one he loved. However, personally I did nothing but make mistakes and embarrass myself over and over again, so it would be a little late to start

despairing over it now. *I suppose for Lord Simeon, who normally doesn't make any mistakes worth mentioning, it would spark intense feelings of regret.*

“Regarding the alcohol,” I replied, “you must see that it was the duke’s fault. You firmly refused to drink it, but he forced you anyway. He purposely got you drunk in order to torment you. You were given no choice but to drink it, so can you really blame yourself?”

“But—”

“Until last night, I had never seen you drink alcohol before. I’d also never heard anything from anyone else about your drinking habits. That’s because you know your own constitution very well and keep yourself from consuming any, isn’t it? A truly bad drunk is someone who never turns down a drink, no matter how many times they repeat their mistakes and upset the people around them. They’re defeated by their desire to drink, and keep doing it without any thought for the consequences, because they’re too selfish or weak-willed to do otherwise. You’re the complete opposite. You have the discipline to refrain from drinking at all. So how can you see yourself as a failure? I think it’s very admirable, actually.”

I stood and lightly dusted off my knees. Lord Simeon’s gaze followed me up, and I offered a hand to him. “Furthermore, it was my fault that we were separated in the mirror maze, and I see it as a positive, not a negative, that you’re a gentlemen who treats ladies with respect. It’s true that you were a little too lenient with that fighter, but if she had been coming not for you but for His Highness, I’m sure you’d have protected him from her, woman or otherwise—wouldn’t you? In summary, I’m not disappointed in you at all. However, if you don’t stand up now, I *will* end up disappointed.”

Lord Simeon’s expression changed at my last words.

“The situation has become rather grave,” I clarified. “Apparently, I am to be married to His Highness.”

He furrowed his brow, thoroughly unable to grasp this. “What in the...?”

I shrugged my shoulders with much the same feeling. “It turns out that the duke’s wicked games yesterday were not *just* games, but also a concerted effort to break us up. I was being encouraged to grow disillusioned with you so that I

would stop the wedding and cancel the engagement. Apparently, His Highness's failure to choose a bride has led to Her Majesty the Queen's attention being drawn to...me. Who would have guessed it?"

"Her Majesty? You? But..."

"It seems that she noticed how friendly I have become with him, and it raised her hopes. Of course, she knows that I'm engaged, so she probably only brought it up to the duke as an idle complaint...but either way, the duke took it upon himself to try and shake the foundations of our relationship. That's the truth of the matter. In retrospect, I have a feeling that when he suddenly set upon me last time, that was probably also a test of my virtue."

Lord Simeon stared at me.

"Now, thanks to this business with the ring, we happened to fall right into his clutches. He must have thought it a perfect opportunity. He dangled the offer in front of me, going so far as to call it an order. If we show the slightest hint of weakness, I really will be made into His Highness's bride. Well? What are you going to do? Will you fight against the royal family for me? Or would you rather offer me up to avoid incurring their wrath?"

He took hold of my outstretched hand, gripping it tightly and enclosing it in warmth. He quickly stood up. It was as though his dejected appearance earlier had been a mirage. The face I had been looking down at was suddenly high above my head. I craned my neck up—so far it hurt—and what I saw was no longer the face of a scared, lost child. That was gone, replaced with the same powerful gaze I was used to.

I smiled wildly and gripped his hand in return.

Before he had allowed me to return to Lord Simeon, the duke had demanded an answer.

I took a deep breath and said, "Unfortunately, that would make everyone unhappy."

"Unhappy?"

"Yes. I'd be unhappy, Lord Simeon would be unhappy, and so would His

Highness. No one would be pleased with the outcome. On the surface it appears to be a perfect solution, but the scars it would leave on everyone's hearts would not be healed so easily. Everyone's lives would be forever tinged with sadness. It is in no way a viable option."

As I spoke, my throat and tongue lost their dryness. The words came naturally, and I shook off my trembling with sheer force of will and put a smile on my face.

"His Highness dotes on me, but he has absolutely no romantic feelings toward me. He sees me purely and simply as his subordinate's fiancée—and, if you'll permit me to be conceited enough to say so, as his own friend. His Highness's tastes are quite specific. He likes young ladies with a sweet appearance, who are quiet and meek, but strong at their core. He wants someone with no ambition at all of becoming crown princess, who is unaware of His Highness to the point of being indifferent toward him."

"But you fit those criteria exactly, do you not? Leaving aside the 'meek' portion." Those last words were a throwaway addition, but did this mean he saw me as having a sweet appearance? I found that quite unexpected.

"No, it would never work. His Highness could never cope with me. He said as much to Lord Simeon once. 'I have the deepest level of respect for you. Although I fear I'd rather do anything but follow in your unenviable footsteps.' That was how he phrased it."

I was fairly sure he liked me as a friend. In the time we'd spent together, I had a sense that a relationship had developed between the two of us. However, it was not a romantic one. I had seen how His Highness looked at women he was in love with, and it was entirely unlike the way he looked at me.

From my point of view as well, His Highness was not the Prince Charming of my dreams. I liked him, but not in that way.

"The only one who can keep up with me is Lord Simeon. No matter what outlandish things I say or what trouble I cause him, he doesn't abandon me. He may get angry and exasperated, but he still puts in great effort to understand me. No one can do that except Lord Simeon."

"Rather than fitting in with your husband's life, you want him to fit in with

yours? That is quite an insolent thing to say when discussing a match with royalty.”

“I suppose it is, and that’s exactly why I wouldn’t be suitable. Of course, as a wife I intend to honor and obey my husband, which means conforming to his needs. However, I have interests that I cannot abandon, and when I’m pursuing those, it’s Lord Simeon who has to consider my needs. The only one I can go through life with, as we stand together faithfully, is Lord Simeon.”

There was no hint of a smile on the duke’s face as he looked back at me. He wasn’t angry; rather, he was musing expressionlessly. This still felt slightly eerie, and I was a little scared, but I held my head high and kept going.

“And even if, hypothetically, Lord Simeon and I did split up due to some discord between us, I doubt His Highness would count me among the candidates for his hand. It’s unimaginable that he would make such an awkward and unpleasant choice. During that time, he’d be Lord Simeon’s ally more than mine, and I would be pushed further away. Even if Lord Simeon and I had mutually agreed to split up, there would still be consequences like that—it would not be a clean break. Besides, His Highness is already in a situation where a new romance *might* be unfolding...or might not.”

Rather than being concerned about me, lately His Highness was doing his utmost to get closer to Julianne. I could have let that slip—it would have been convenient for me!—but that seemed likely to result in Julianne being forced to marry him, so I couldn’t say it. I wanted His Highness to win Julianne’s heart through his own efforts, not for her to be pressured into it. Lord Simeon and the princesses understood this and were keeping it a secret, so I couldn’t mention her name at this juncture.

Instead, I decided to offer the duke some advice. “If it’s really a matter of bringing His Highness’s wedding closer at all costs, could you perhaps try reducing his workload? His Highness is far too busy right now. He can’t even find the time to meet the lady he’s fallen for. I don’t think His Highness’s lack of romantic success is purely down to issues with him as a person.”

“I sympathize with his predicament, but unfortunately His Majesty is rather busy as well.”

“Then couldn’t you lend him your aid, Your Grace?”

“...Me?”

This was an insolent suggestion indeed. Truly, it was above my station to make such a remark, and it might lead not to merely some cross words, but an actual punishment. However, I had been fervently locking horns with the duke since the previous afternoon, so at this stage I wasn’t going to hold back. *And, I thought secretly, if I were to be punished for it, that would certainly be an occasion to beg mercy from His Highness.*

“There are situations where the representative of the royal family needn’t necessarily be His Majesty or His Highness— isn’t that right? In those cases, couldn’t someone else take their place? For inspections, conferences, obligatory mingling with important people from other countries... I don’t think it would cause any problems if you took charge of those, Your Grace.”

His eyes narrowed suddenly. He did not say a word. *Scary—far too scary!* But I wasn’t going to be defeated. I maintained my smile at all costs and stared right back at him. *Princess Lucienne’s husband, Duke Chalier, is already helping out with official business just like that! You shouldn’t be playing around all the time, Duke Silvestre! You should be doing at least a little bit of work as well!*

“Young lady,” said the duke in a quiet mutter, “you have a very impudent tongue.” My heart shriveled up in fear. Inside, I felt ready to cry. He flashed a malicious smile. “All that work would be most inconvenient. Far easier to offer you up on a silver platter.”

“The offer of me would be rejected, anyway.”

We both glared at each other, all smiles. The hands of the clock behind the duke pointed to seven o’clock. The silence in the room was interrupted by the clock ringing seven times to mark the hour.

“Very well,” said the duke when the last echoes had faded. “Go to your fiancé first of all and see what state he is in. Once you’ve confirmed whether or not you have a partner who shares your attitude, think the matter over.”

“I shall go and do just that...although there really isn’t anything further to think about.”

I stood. I hurried to the exit as quickly as I could without being rude, then briefly turned around to curtsy.

“Come back here after breakfast,” he said.

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

“I’ve prepared a very special challenge.”

He still isn’t finished with his games!? But I restrained the anger that was rising up in me and nodded with a smile. *We definitely cannot lose this. Nor is Lord Simeon the type to remain out for the count. We’ll show off our bond so forcefully that even you’ll understand how obstinate we are, Duke Silvestre!*

And thus, I headed to the final battle.

Beside me was the man I loved, the light of strength having returned to his eyes. He held my hand and we walked together, striding forward, side by side.

I vowed in my heart that no matter what, the bells of joy would ring out across the clear blue sky that day.

Chapter Thirteen

Second by second, the scheduled start of the ceremony drew closer. I was frustrated even by the time we spent eating breakfast. I had hoped we could avoid it entirely, but the duke had said to come back after breakfast, and even if we had rushed, the duke himself would no doubt have enjoyed a relaxed and refined breakfast before meeting us. I understood all too well that skipping it would have no effect other than forcing us to wait with empty stomachs, so I had kept my annoyance in check and eaten.

By the time Lord Simeon and I entered the blue and white room together, it was nearly eight o'clock. Lutin had arrived before us, and Ambassador Nigel followed shortly after. I had steeled myself for them to start poking fun at Lord Simeon for last night's drunken escapade, but neither of them so much as alluded to it. I could understand the ambassador restraining himself, but it wasn't like Lutin to miss a chance to ridicule Lord Simeon. Perhaps he wasn't inclined to criticize a matter of Lord Simeon's constitution that the latter could do nothing about. Despite how badly they got along, on a certain level they did respect each other. *I must say, I really don't understand relationships between men.*

While we waited, hardly conversing at all, the hands of the clock rapidly advanced. The duke was taking his time. My irritation rose in intensity, and I almost wanted to ask a servant to summon him, but I knew that would be pointless. He was intentionally making us wait, knowing what a hurry we were in. It was aggravating, but I had no choice but to endure it.

Finally the hour hand completed a full circuit and the clock struck nine. Only one hour left. I was ready to cradle my head in my hands, convinced we were never going to make it, when finally the duke and duchess entered the room.

They sat in their usual spot, with no apology and no hint of contrition on their faces. The duke slowly looked around at everyone, then his gaze landed on me. "Judging by your face, I gather your intentions have not changed."

“They have not,” I said with a decisive nod.

He looked at Lord Simeon as well, then let out a snort at the unwavering gaze that met him. “So young and green.”

“Your Grace,” said Lord Simeon, “as you are aware, we no longer have any time left. I’d like to ask you to clearly state whether you are going to let us go or not.” He no longer showed any signs of anxiety or self-loathing. It was Lord Simeon, with his usual imposing aura.

In the face of that confident look, which said that we would not give in no matter how much he tormented us, the duke took a short moment to gather his breath. *Could it be that he’s finally beginning to admit defeat, even if only a little bit?* “Indeed,” he said at last. “Let us begin the next game, then.”

We had been forewarned of this, but the resentment rose in me anyway. I bit my lip. *So he really is going to continue with this nonsense.* I felt a warm grip on my hand. When I looked to the side, Lord Simeon’s light blue eyes were urging me to stay calm. I replied with a nod and turned to face the duke again.

The duke said, “This game is a rather simple one. All you have to do is answer a question. It won’t take much time or require any exertion.”

“Understood,” replied Lord Simeon calmly. “Then please feel free to start.”

Lutin and Ambassador Nigel also waited silently to hear what this “question” would be.

Duchess Christine watched us with the same smile as ever. She did not interrupt her husband, but rather just watched events unfold. *I suppose she must also believe in the one she loves.*

“Don’t answer until I tell you to. Take your time to think it over in silence. In this room, there are seven hidden animals. I want you to tell me which animals are hidden and where. You must find them all.”

It was like a children’s riddle. *Seven animals...* Upon hearing that, everyone began to cast their eyes around the room.

The first thing my eyes landed on, very close by, was the lion ornament above the fireplace. *I can count this as the first animal, I’m sure. It’s not really*

“hidden,” but no matter how you look at it, it’s definitely an animal.

Are there other animal motifs in the room, I wonder? I searched the patterns on the walls and ceiling, but I couldn’t spot anything that seemed to fit.

The men were all lost in thought as well. Solving riddles appeared not to be one of Ambassador Nigel’s strong points; his expression suggested he was completely lost. Lutin folded his arms and stared fixedly at the ceiling, deep in thought.

As for Lord Simeon, he swept his eyes across the room briefly, then returned his attention to the duke. *What does that mean? Does he know the answer already?*

I puzzled over it intensely. *Animals... Animals... They’re meant to be “hidden,” so they probably won’t all be in a form I’d immediately recognize.*

Hmm? The throw I was on sitting on, placed over the couch, caught my attention. *It’s sheepskin, isn’t it? That’s one of the animals! A sheep!*

If so, does that mean those leather chairs count as a cow? Oh, and what if the feet of the couches look like cat’s paws!? Oh, they don’t...

Although I’d had a burst of ideas, I was quickly stumped again. But I had to keep a level head. If this puzzle was the reason I’d noticed so many odd mismatched elements of the room’s decor, then the clock had to have a meaning as well.

It was tall and thin, with a large pendulum swinging. *It’s not a cuckoo clock, but perhaps another animal... And if it’s hidden in a clock, then it can only be...!*

Yes, I have a lion, a sheep, a cow, and...!

The duke spoke again. “Are you ready?” He looked only at Lord Simeon, ignoring the reactions of the rest of us. “I don’t care about the others. You, Simeon Flaubert. Answer me.”

Despite all the thinking we had done, it seemed we would not be called on. Right up till the end, the duke was determined to try and expose Lord Simeon to ridicule. *But he’s not the kind of person to be broken that easily!*

All eyes were drawn to Lord Simeon. My whole body was full to the brim with

hope and curiosity as he opened his mouth. “Goat, fish, sheep, cow, crab, lion, scorpion. They correspond to the seven astrological signs that are animals. Isn’t that right?”

He answered smoothly, without any doubt in his voice. That was the unflappable Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights that I was used to!

I thought they would all be signs of the zodiac. But where on earth were those other animals?

“There are the sheep and the cow,” he said, pointing to the throw and the chairs, “and the lion,” he added, pointing to the ornament, which was the easiest one of all. Ambassador Nigel nodded, seemingly having gotten only this one.

Lord Simeon pointed to the clock behind the duke. “Hidden inside the clock is a mountain goat. And the crab is...”

He pointed to the ceiling, but I couldn’t follow what he meant. “There’s a crab there? Where?”

I knew it had to be more complicated than simply a crab visible on the ceiling, but no matter how hard I looked I couldn’t understand.

As I was staring in puzzlement, Lutin said, “It’s a constellation, Marielle. You see that the ceiling is studded with pieces of glass, yes? Don’t you think it resembles the starry sky?”

“The starry... Oh!”

I saw it now. I had thought they were just a decoration that had been mixed in among the pattern on the ceiling, but when I looked at the glass fragments as the main feature, they did indeed resemble a sky full of stars.

“Some of the pieces are slightly larger than the others,” Lutin continued. “If you connect those together, you should see a familiar shape.”

“Oh... Wait! Yes, there it is! The constellation of Cancer!”

It had been hard to make out in the context of all the rest, but the shape of the crab constellation was indeed there, alongside Gemini and Leo.

“There are probably lights installed on the other side of the ceiling,” Lutin

explained. "I can see light shining through the pieces of glass. The room must really come into its own if you come in here at night."

Ah, I see. I was impressed. So that's what the room was designed for. No wonder there's no chandelier.

But why Cancer, I wondered? The whole night sky arrangement had been consciously planned to have Cancer as the main focus. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but it didn't seem like the most obvious choice for a central motif. If it were me, I'd have picked Virgo or Sagittarius, or perhaps even a collection of all twelve signs of the zodiac.

Cancer... That's the sign of people born from late June to late July...

Hold on. June? The birthstone for June was pearl. Duchess Christine had asked for a pearl ring. What if...?

I looked from the ceiling to the duchess. She noticed my gaze and returned a grin. *Does that mean I'm right?*

Ugh, Duke Silvestre! You...devoted husband!

I wanted to shout at him as hard as I could. *Ugh, I'm completely exhausted somehow.* I felt on the verge of slumping to the floor.

But Lord Simeon continued, his tone unchanging. "Below the sky are the earth and the sea. And hidden beneath the waves are the fish."

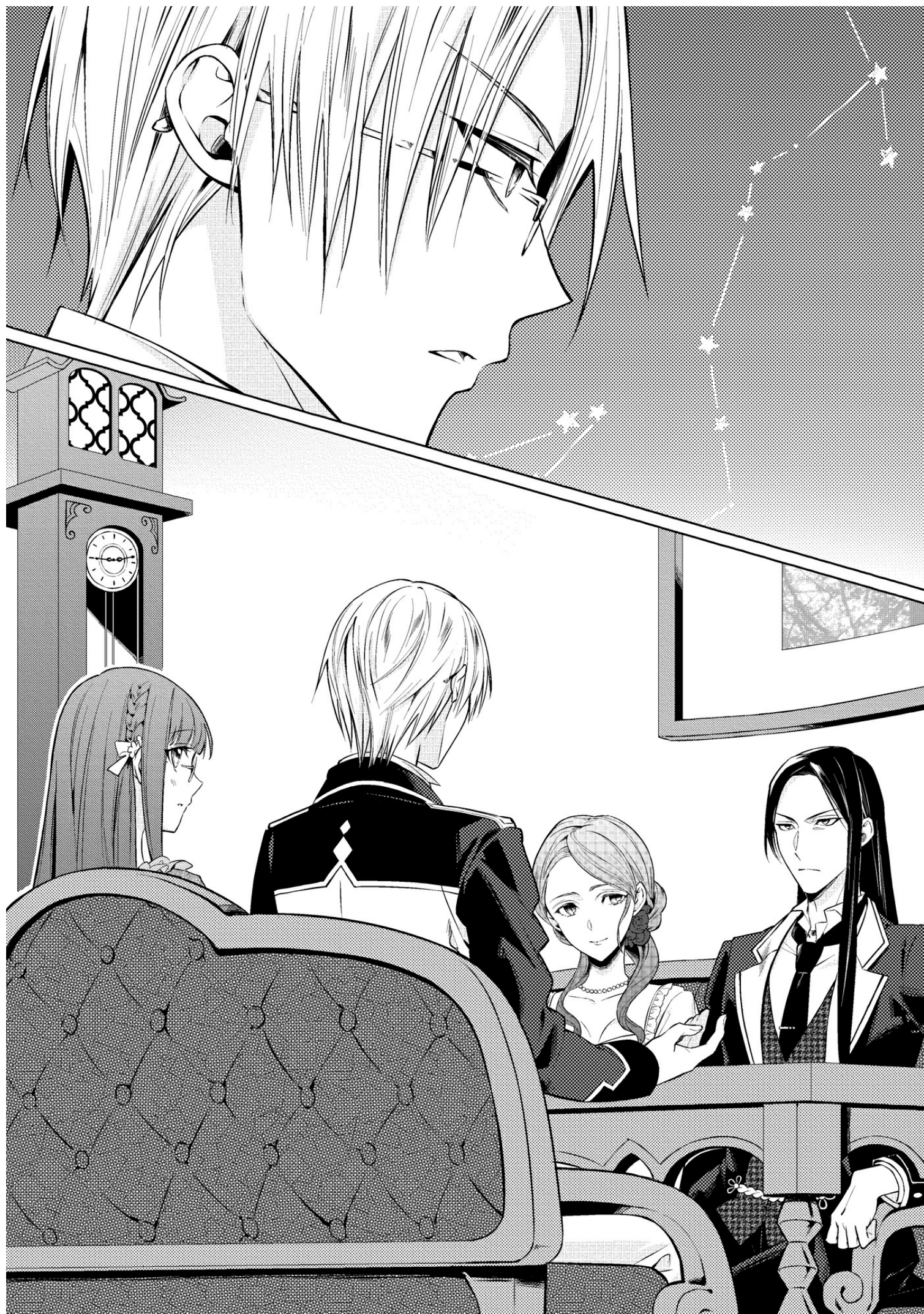
Opposing the ceiling was the floor. Apparently my impression that the blue pattern on the marble resembled waves had been correct.

"I managed to get all of those," Lutin interjected. So far there had been six, which meant there was one left. "But that last one, the scorpion. It's frustrating, but clearly you figured it out, Vice Captain. So tell us... Where is it?"

"Right in front of us," said Lord Simeon.

His gaze did not shift from the duke. He stared unwaveringly at the man before him. *I can definitely understand the desire to describe the duke as a scorpion, but putting that aside, could this one also be...?*

"Your Grace, you were born in November, isn't that right? Your star sign is Scorpio."



Lutin let out an exhausted sigh. He seemed to be drained of all energy at this point as well. “A trick like that, is it? I’ve been outwitted.”

“So this was something you hadn’t investigated,” I said.

“I knew his age, but not his birthday.”

It seemed that even for a spy who had researched everything about Lagrange’s most important people, learning their birthdays and star signs was a bridge too far.

“That is all,” Lord Simeon concluded matter-of-factly.

Duchess Christine applauded. “Magnificent. A perfect answer.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Lutin and the ambassador, too, both smiled in their subtly different ways.

The duchess turned to her husband and said teasingly, “Which means you’ve lost.”

The duke huffed. He did not seem amused. “What a loathsome man you are. I so wanted to see you lose your presence of mind as you did yesterday.”

“I’m surprised at you, too,” Lord Simeon replied. “Yesterday you took aim at my weak points. I expected you to do the same today.”

“I thought a riddle like this would be tough for a rigid thinker like you to solve.”

So the duke had thrown this at Lord Simeon, expecting it to be another challenge he would struggle with. *Too bad for the duke! When it comes to brain teasers, there isn’t a single one Lord Simeon can’t solve!*

...More or less. I decided to conceal the fact that I was a tiny bit surprised. So the Vice Captain’s head is more than just hard. How wonderful—it only makes me fangirl over him more! I’ll follow you anywhere, Lord Simeon!

Lord Simeon did not lose his calmness or politeness, but his voice grew deeper. “This means the latest game is over. What now? Do you intend to continue this?”

Even watching it from the side, I knew that this was the anger that made the

Demon Vice Captain feared by his men. His gaze bored into the duke's eyes like a shard of ice, without any concern for the man's high station. But the recipient of this gaze did not yield an inch either. The blue flame and the gray moon glared straight at one another.

This stifling tension was maintained for a mere moment. Just as lightning threatened to spark between them, a soft voice interrupted. "Surely this has gone far enough, Maurice. They've given you more than enough amusement. You should let them go."

He turned to her with a look of displeasure. "Christine..."

She did not flinch. She smiled gently back at him. "Yesterday you told them that if they satisfied you, you would let them go home. You must keep your promise. Honestly, you cannot claim they didn't provide sufficient entertainment. I've known you for a long time, and yesterday was the first time I have ever seen you clutching your chest in laughter."

"Is that so?" he replied.

"Yes, it is." She looked at us. Though I had previously felt her smile was like a doll's fixed expression, this time I had the impression I was seeing through to her true heart. "I understand that they're cute and amusing little things, and that you could never get bored of playing with them. But, even if they are to your taste, they'll hate you if you bully them too much."

"I don't care," the duke replied. "They've hated me for a long time already."

"What a thing to say!" She looked at us again. "Please, I hope you won't misunderstand his intentions. Despite how it may seem, his treatment of you doesn't come from a place of malice."

"Duchess Christine..." I said.

"If he really doesn't like someone, he causes them far more suffering. He doesn't use this kind of lighthearted prank."

I had nothing to say to this. Was this an attempt to defend her husband? There had been nothing "lighthearted" about any of this.

"When I asked for your help last night," she continued, "I had decided that if

you accepted my request, I would leave you to your fate no matter how grisly. Your hobby of secretly observing other people and collecting gossip about them never quite sat right with me. If you were willing to disclose the secrets for your own benefit, I would have felt no compunction in letting my husband torment you as long as he liked, no matter what state it left you in.”

I looked back at her. *That was...a test?*

“But you were a good girl, weren’t you? I’ve changed my opinion of you.”

What? That moment was THAT important? And... And... How narrowly I avoided hanging myself by my own rope!

The duchess beamed, presenting a saint-like face without a hint of ill will visible. *Behind a smile as gentle as that, she’s thinking something so gruesome... It’s like the two of them are made for each other. Scary stuff.*

“But regardless of my opinion of you, I was against my husband’s plan. I never thought so little of you that you *couldn’t* be a match for His Highness at all, but I doubt His Highness or His Majesty would find it palatable to forcibly tear you and your fiancé apart.” She turned back to her husband. “Clearly it’s hopeless.”

The duke rested his chin in his hands and let out a deep sigh. “Yes, I suppose I’ve no choice but to give up. We’ll end it here.”

“Your Grace!” I exclaimed buoyantly before I could stop myself.

The duke showed me a smile without any venom. “I suppose I’ll place my hopes in this ‘new romance’ of his. That wasn’t some sort of makeshift nonsense, was it?”

“No, not at all! Only, it depends on the efforts of His Highness and everyone around him.”

“Fine, then. I suppose I can help him a little bit. And, since you’re the one who said it, I expect you to put in every effort as well.”

“Of course! I’ll stake my pen on it!”

“What? Your pen?”

“Oh, sorry. I meant that...what’s at stake depends on it! So I’ll work really hard!”

The duke waved his hand indifferently. “Very well. You may go. If you hurry, you *might* still make it in time.”

Hearing those words, Lord Simeon and I both stood up at once.

“Thank you,” said Lord Simeon. “Then we shall take advantage of your offer and leave at this stage.”

“Thank you so much for your *fine* hospitality,” I added.

After uttering these goodbyes that mixed gratitude with resentment, we spun on our heels. Lord Simeon took my hand. We exchanged glances for a second, and a smile lit up both of our faces. He pulled me along by the hand, and I started running.

Quick, quick! Keep going! Keep going!

I ran, spurred on by such great joy I felt I might explode. We made for the building’s exit, practically tumbling over, apologizing to servants we almost crashed into.

In the waiting room near the front door, we found that an arm wrestling match, of all things, was in full swing amongst the servants. The muscular fighters from yesterday were looking red in the face, with Dario as their opponent. The three beautiful women were cheering as well, but I couldn’t see Joseph anywhere.

“Arthur, where’s Joseph?” I asked as we ran in.

Arthur, who was serving as judge, reacted with only a slight look of surprise at our hasty arrival. “He went outside. Apparently there was a visitor of some kind.”

“Thank you! And Dario, you’re as impressive as ever today!”

We left the room without waiting for a reply, then leapt out through the front door with the same vigor as before.

Outside, we were met not only by Joseph, but by another two familiar faces as well. Lord Adrien and my older brother Gerard both stood in formalwear, ready to attend the wedding.

“Simeon!” shouted Lord Adrien.

“Marielle!” called out my brother in a similar manner. “What on earth are you doing here!?”

Joseph approached. “My lord! Did the duke give permission to leave?”

“Yes,” Lord Simeon replied. “Prepare the carriage and— No, that won’t get us there in time. Detach the horse, we’ll ride on that.”

“But it doesn’t have reins or a saddle...”

Just as Lord Simeon was asking Joseph to make preparations, Lord Adrien interrupted. “Simeon, what happened? A messenger arrived and told us you would be staying here, then you didn’t even come home in the morning, without so much as a word!”

“Adrien, why are you here?” demanded Lord Simeon.

“Mother threw me out of the house and told me to come and get you! Everyone else went straight to the church. You’d best be ready, Mother is in a *frightful* rage.”

“The situation is much the same for us,” my brother added.

Adrien continued, “There was no time left so I asked for an audience with the duke, but he wouldn’t let me come inside. He just made me wait out here! Argh, I can’t believe that at the very last minute, no, the *last second* of the last minute, you would do such a thing! But let’s deal with that later. Since you’re out here now, does that mean you’re going to the church?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said.

Resolutely ignoring all of the questions, Lord Simeon impatiently asked, “Adrien, did you come in a carriage or on horseback?”

Lord Adrien blinked in confusion. “Well, on a horse, but—”

“Very well, then we’ll use that. You should follow in the carriage.”

“What!?”

“There’ll be time for discussions later. Hurry up and give me your horse.”

“But, I, what!? Wait a moment!”

While this went on, time was ticking away. Amid all our hurried impatience

and panic, the duke's butler arrived. Behind him was a stable boy leading a magnificent black horse.

"The master said to give this to you," said the butler, pointing at the horse while we looked on in surprise. "This is the household's fastest horse. We were told to fully tack it up and present it to you with best wishes for your wedding. Please, take it."

From behind the butler the stable boy came forward with the horse. Lord Simeon immediately began checking its body and horse tack. He examined the hooves and horseshoes one by one. *I suppose it would be naive to simply trust the duke's kindness. Still, while I understand the feeling, surely he wouldn't try to trick us at this late stage?*

"He's a boy, isn't he? What's his name?" I asked the stable boy.

"Mercure. He's four years old and full of spirit."

"What a wonderful name! Just like the planet Mercury! Take good care of us, Mercure!"

I stroked his glossy black coat, and his pretty eyes looked down at me intelligently. He was larger than the average horse, and very solid. His tail and mane had been cared for meticulously. He was a beautiful boy.

Lord Simeon stood up. "Please convey our gratitude to His Grace. We'd be honored to take him."

"Very good, sir," said the butler.

Lord Simeon put his arms around my waist and lifted me up onto the horse in one smooth motion, setting me down in a sidesaddle position. He then climbed up onto the horse to sit right behind me.

Flustered, Lord Adrien ran to his own horse, saying, "B-b-but, Simeon, wait!" My brother ran to his horse as well.

I casually glanced up and saw Lutin and Ambassador Nigel standing on a second floor balcony to see us off.

Lutin was staring intently at me. I hesitated briefly, wondering how to respond, but after a moment's thought I gave him a huge wave. "If we meet

again, you have to tell me your real name!”

Surprise appeared on Lutin’s face. He didn’t say anything in return. He simply laughed and waved back at me.

Ambassador Nigel and I waved at one another as well, but then Lord Simeon turned the horse around and blocked my view of the balcony with his body. We started moving toward the gate.

“Marielle...” said Lord Simeon.

I replied, “Lutin stayed with us until the end, not because of his official duties, but essentially out of concern for us. Could you not at least acknowledge him as something like a friend?”

“Absolutely not. Under no circumstances.” It was as firm and dismissive a refusal as he could have made. But just as I thought there really was no hope at all, he added, “But...I will acknowledge that he truly cared about you.”

“Good,” I replied.

I faced backwards on the horse and wrapped my arms around him, readying myself for the shaking to come. Gerard and Lord Adrien mounted their horses in a feverish haste and rode to catch up to us.

Just then, another horse came racing in from the direction of the gate. I thought it might be someone else coming to look for us, but whoever it was charged right past us without slowing down. The rider was dressed in a dark red military uniform, and appeared tall and slender even on horseback. At first I thought it was a man, but then I saw the long hair, bound into a ponytail, as it rushed by.

I hardly had time to react before a loud voice—undoubtedly that of a woman—began to yell in Easdalian, “You playboy! You good-for-nothing slacker of a boss! How long do you intend to shirk your duties!?”

“Oh, Eva, you went out of your way to come and get me?” the ambassador answered in a bright and carefree tone.

The woman in the military uniform brought her horse to a stop not far from the front door and let her angry voice ring out. “Don’t...you...*dare!*” she

shouted. “I told you that today’s plans were ones you *absolutely could not miss*, did I not? How many times did I remind you? I made you repeat it back to me! I even made you carry around a note about it! So why on God’s green earth did you not come back!?”

“I was sort of tied up here, you see. I decided it would be fine as long as you were there.”

“*Fine!?* Of course it’s not *fine!* Do you realize how much trouble you’ve caused everyone else because *you* didn’t see fit to do your job, *you halfwit scoundrel!?*”

Goodness me! Her attitude was so menacing, even Lord Simeon turned to look in surprise.

“Arthur!” she cried. “Come down here at once and bring that dunce with you! Tie him up if you have to!”

Arthur, who had shown his face to see what all the fuss was about, ran back inside the building in a panic. Ambassador Nigel, meanwhile, did not run despite the order for his own capture that had just been issued. He simply laughed, apparently very entertained.

I have heard there was one underling in particular who has been suffering a great deal... This must be her! Oh, and could it be that she’s the one he...?

Heavens, how intriguing! I feel the foreshadowing of something I’d want to fangirl over! I wish I could confirm it with my own eyes, but there’s no time! What a shame. Next time we meet, I will definitely not forget to investigate.

“We’re setting off,” said Lord Simeon. I embraced him even more firmly, and he cried out, “Hyah!” He kicked Mercure’s side and the horse sped up in an instant.

Suddenly my body was shaken around violently. Pushing my glasses back as they threatened to slide off, I fought to harmonize myself with the rhythm of Mercure’s energetic motions. It was a challenge while riding sidesaddle. I clung onto Lord Simeon and bore it as best I could, somehow managing to stay on the horse.

Lord Simeon’s arms, holding onto the reins, firmly surrounded and supported

me. I nestled up to his chest and felt his breathing and his heartbeat as we bounded through the open gate.

Chapter Fourteen

Running. Running. Running.

Endlessly onward. Faster than the wind.

There was nothing left to stop us. In front of us stretched the road that would take us there.

Mercure ran so fast, I could have believed he had sprouted wings. Even though we were riding double, the distance between us and Lord Adrien quickly widened. My brother Gerard fell even farther behind. *Don't attempt the impossible, either of you! It's all right to take your time and arrive after us.*

Lord Simeon used his superlative riding skills to eke out every last drop of Mercure's majestic power. Before we knew it, we had made it through the forest and were nearing the city proper. We passed a verdant park full of flowers, where I could see people taking a morning walk. Many of them were nobles who had come here to enjoy themselves.

My eyes were drawn to what appeared to be a whole family walking together. *Yes, I thought so! It's Countess Simone and Lady Monique from House Pautrier! I haven't seen them since the incident last year. So Countess Simone feels up to going out again. And Lady Monique looks cheerful, too! She's smiling!*

Earl Pautrier was sitting in a wheelchair, but he looked well too. And the young man pushing the wheelchair... *Is that the real Lord Cedric? Has he come to visit from Linden again? In which case, could the young woman beside him be...?*

But I had no chance to confirm it. They faded further and further into the distance behind us. I was glad, at least, that none of them appeared to have unhappy faces.

People stared, wondering what was going on, as we galloped across the tranquil landscape. Among them I saw one with lustrous golden hair surrounded by a number of devoted men.

“Lady Aurelia!” I shouted. “Good morning!”

The rose princess’s beautiful eyes opened wide. “What in the... What are you doing now!? Isn’t today your wedding day!?”

“Yes! We’re on our way there!”

“Whaaat!?”

But in a flash, Lady Aurelia’s form receded farther and farther away from us as well. *I’ll see you again at the reception. Let’s say hello properly there!*

We crossed the Philippe Bridge and dashed into the city center. In order to take the shortest route to the church, Lord Simeon opted not to circle around, but to cut straight through the city. It was around the time of day that the city began to come alive, and the number of pedestrians and carriages on the streets was rapidly increasing. We had to get through before it became too congested. Skillfully controlling Mercure, Lord Simeon took us directly northwards.

We ran past Quatre Saisons, then Bijoux Carpentier. We left the district of more upper-class stores and reached an area more frequented by commoners.

Then Lord Simeon tutted.

The road we were about to reach was overflowing with people. Stalls were lined up on each side selling all sorts of groceries and sundries. This was Marché Nord, one of the marketplaces scattered throughout Sans-Terre. It was known to be a bustling place, but even by its usual standards, it was crammed with an exceptionally large number of people today. *But why? This street wouldn’t normally be clogged with so many—*

“Oh!” I cried when I realized. “Today’s a public holiday!”

I had completely forgotten. *That’s right, we planned our wedding ceremony for the public holiday!*

Markets had more stalls than usual on public holidays, so shoppers gathered in greater numbers as well. These crowds are another thing that Sans-Terre is famed for!

“Something of an oversight,” I added.

Lord Simeon groaned. “Shall we go back and find a different route? Only, that might take even longer...”

He made Mercure proceed slowly as he took in the surroundings. This mistake was quite unlike Lord Simeon, but in the end it came as no surprise. Servants might come here to shop, but their noble masters would never come to the marketplace in person. If noblemen wanted to shop, they rode their carriages to specialty stores or department stores. They would never buy fish or cheese from a stall by the side of the road. I knew all about marketplaces from the research I had done, but there were some noblewomen who didn’t even know of their existence. Even Lord Simeon probably didn’t know much about them beyond what he had heard.

“Excuse me, please let us through,” he said, somehow making Mercure keep walking through the throngs of criss-crossing people. Some shouted angrily back, telling us we shouldn’t be trying to ride a horse through a place like this. I wanted to tell them, *You’re quite right! I’m so sorry!*

“Lord Simeon, let’s get down and walk for now.”

It was frustrating, but we had no choice. It was dangerous to keep going on horseback like this. Mercure, too, seemed to be on edge. If something spooked him, we could be injured, and people nearby as well.

“All right,” said Lord Simeon. “I’ll get down and hold the reins, so you stay there.”

“It would be easier for Mercure to walk without anyone sitting on him, don’t you think?”

“Will you be able to make it through this crowd without us getting separated? Besides, it’s dangerous in this sort of place.”

As we were having our disagreement atop the horse, a voice interjected. “Hello there, madam! In a spot of bother again?”

“Hmm?” I turned to look and was surprised to see a middle-aged man return my gaze at the same level. He was sitting on a stepladder, apparently in the middle of repairing a stall’s awning. “You’ve got a different fella with you today. What happened—did you get cheated on again?”

“Excuse me? Cheated on?”

“I would never do that!” barked Lord Simeon.

The man laughed, giving no mind to our bafflement. “The gentleman from a couple of months ago was ridiculously good-looking as well, but this one gives him a run for his money! Every man I see you with is an absurdly handsome princely type. How come you’re so popular with the blokes?”

“I don’t know what you... Oh! Wait!” Finally it came back to me, and I clapped my hands together. “Could you be...that fiacre driver?”

“The very same. Your timely savior who drove to the palace to summon the knights for you!”

“Yes, you were there for me in my hour of need! Thank you so, so much!”

Lord Simeon still wore an expression that said he couldn’t follow at all.

“Did you retire from driving the fiacre?” I asked.

“This is my wife’s stall. I’m just helping out for the day.”

“Oh, I see. Apologies. Well done for spotting me, in any case!”

“It’s the gentleman that really stood out, to be honest. Then I looked at you next to him, and I was sure I’d seen you somewhere before. A young lady who’s dressed to the nines, but otherwise is plain and has a small bosom...”

“Another one who tells women apart based on their bosoms! Anyway, if you’ll excuse us, we’re in a hurry.” *Oh my GOD! Men! What is wrong with them!?*

“Chasing after someone again?”

“No, trying to get to the church. It’s almost time for the wedding.”

He stared at us, open-mouthed. “Huh? Right now? Whose wedding?”

“Ours. And we’re about to be late, so if you’ll excuse us...”

The man made an odd noise in response. He looked down at a woman on the ground, presumably his wife. The two of them looked at each other with funny expressions, then both of them burst out laughing.

After a moment he said, “It boggles the mind. I’ve never seen a bride and

groom in a big panic about to miss their own wedding before!”

“Circumstances beyond our control!” I replied.

“Then there’s nothing else for it.” He stood up on top of the stepladder, turned to face the crowds filling the street, and shouted in a surprisingly loud voice, “Heeeeey! Open up a path! These two are about to get married! They’re going to be late!”

All at once, all eyes turned to look at us. Lord Simeon hurriedly soothed Mercure, who was on the verge of bolting.

“Let them through!” the man continued. “The ceremony can hardly start without the bride and groom!”

He managed to convince the crowd, which parted like the legendary sea. A clear path appeared before us.

“There, they’ve made way for you. Go on, hurry.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Anytime. Glad to be of service.” He smiled cheerfully.

Lord Simeon bowed his head. “We truly appreciate it.” Then he gripped the reins again, faced forward and set Mercure moving.

Whistles and cheers of encouragement flew at us from both sides.

“Congratulations!”

“To the bride and groom!”

“Stupid man! Don’t stay out all night the day before your wedding!”

“Forgetting the time because you’re too busy playing with other women comes *after* you’re married!”

“Congrats! Here, have this!”

“And this!”

Several items were thrown from the stalls nearby, but the only ones I managed to catch were a melon and a large lump of cheese.

“Lady Marielle!” shouted a voice I remembered. Another familiar face was

among the crowd. "Congratulations! I hope it all goes smoothly!"

"Thank you!" I replied. "I'll visit you at the publisher again soon!"

Lord Michel waved his hand, clutching a shopping bag. Today it seemed he wasn't doing work for the publishing company, but shopping for himself. I recognized the teenage boy beside him as well. House Montagnier's young master, Lord Camille, watched us go past with a look of disbelief.

It seemed the half-brothers had managed to reconnect. Even though they lived in different places, they had managed to develop a bond between them. I could see a bright future for them both.

Word spread through the crowd from person to person. Even those who hadn't heard the original message from the fiacre driver moved aside to open a path for us. Sans-Terre's denizens really are jovial and full of empathy, and that's an attitude that I absolutely love.

"Stop! Thief!" rose a cry not far from us. "Catch him!"

A thief was running off with a handbag. Alas, this was another thing Sans-Terre was famed for. Lord Simeon silently took the cheese out of my hand. His throw did not miss its target, hitting the robber square in the head. Leaving cheers and applause in our wake, we galloped to the church.

After racing for our lives, we arrived at last.

Julianne stood waiting outside the entrance. "Marielle!" she wailed. "You're finally here!" She embraced me when I dismounted from the horse, but just as quickly turned around and yelled, "Auntie, Uncle! Marielle's here! Lord Simeon, too!"

Immediately a number of people rushed out of the church. At their vanguard was Prince Severin. Once he had confirmed our presence with his own eyes, a mixture of anger and relief came over his handsome face. "You pair of ninnies! I honestly thought you wouldn't make it. Why didn't you call on me!? I told you I would step in and lend a helping hand!"

"Apologies," I said, "but we were denied all contact with the outside world. Here, have a melon."

“A melon!?”

“Yes. Julianne loves them.”

He gulped. “Does she now? Miss... Uh, Miss Julianne...”

“Yes?” she stammered. “I’m...rather busy, so... Later, perhaps...”

“Y-yes, quite right. Let’s make a fine feast of this melon...a tad later on.”

Exactly! Just like that, Your Highness! Leaving them there, Lord Simeon and I entered the church. Just then...

“You...simpleton of a son!”

Countess Estelle’s voice was brimming with anger, and to accompany it, she threw something at Lord Simeon. He caught it just before it struck his face. *Wait...is that a chalice? If you start throwing those around, the priest will get rather upset.*

She charged toward us, a vein throbbing at her temple. “What were you thinking, staying away from home all night with a young lady from outside of our family!? Even if you are about to be married, it’s still not permissible behavior for an engaged couple! If you really couldn’t endure any longer, you could have indulged as much as you wanted at home! I made every effort to enable that and you dodged it at every turn, so why now, at this late stage!?”

“Mother, that’s not what happened. The situation was entirely different from what you’re imagining.” Lord Simeon returned the chalice to the priest with a tired expression.

“Different? What on earth do you mean? Why else would you be—”

Earl Maximilian approached from behind and interrupted her tirade. “My dear, we can discuss all this later. Now’s not the time to be arguing. Not while everyone’s waiting. The priority right now is the ceremony.”

“Yes...I suppose you’re right.” Her beautiful face still filled with anger, Countess Estelle withdrew.

We, on the other hand, accosted the priest.

“Yes, here we are!” said Lord Simeon. “We apologize most profusely, but

please start the ceremony!”

“Yes! Please!” I added.

“Wha—?” He looked back at us with some confusion. “You’d like me to start it right now?”

“This is the time we arranged, isn’t it?” I said.

“Please!” said Lord Simeon. “If you don’t mind!”

Our hounding of the priest was interrupted by His Highness. “Wait, wait, wait. Do you honestly mean to get married in that scruffy old state? Calm down and take a look at yourselves!”

Following this reprimand, we looked down at our clothes. We were still wearing the same outfits as the day before, and both of us had disheveled hair from rushing here on horseback. I was covered in sweat and felt sure I looked much the worse for wear. More surprisingly, even Lord Simeon’s beautiful good looks were somewhat diminished.

The excitement of having finally arrived, just in the nick of time, had made us so eager that all thought of our appearances had flown right out of our heads.

His Highness sighed. “After toiling away for months to make today as splendiferous as can be, you can’t seriously intend to throw it all away. You’d regret it for your entire lives. You’ll have to start a smidgen late, but there’s no getting around that now. Go and get ready properly.”

There was nothing we could do but nod and agree. We were dragged away by our respective families and taken to separate rooms to get changed.

I was stripped from top to bottom and my whole body was scrubbed clean. Ideally I’d have liked to have a bath, but of course there wasn’t time. Instead, Natalie repeatedly dipped a towel in hot water and wiped me down.

My mother leaned into a chair, pressing her fingers against her head while Julianne fanned her. “My word, young lady, you will be the death of me. Must you make me worry right up until the very last moment? And whatever this business was with the duke...is it settled?”

“Yes, it’s been resolved, thoroughly and completely. He gave us a horse as a

wedding gift.”

“What about Gerard? Did you see him?”

“Yes, he left there at the same time as us. Only, his riding skills aren’t equal to Lord Simeon’s, so he couldn’t keep up. I expect he’ll arrive soon.”

“I do hope so.” Mother sighed very deeply indeed. “I honestly wondered what we were going to do. His Highness the Crown Prince is gracing us with his attendance, and yet the most crucial figures, the bride and groom, still didn’t return no matter how long we waited. His Highness said he understood the circumstances, but everyone was on pins and needles.”

“Sorry.”

“When you were born, your father started crying. He said, ‘One day, we’ll have to give this little girl away!’ I got annoyed with him for getting so ahead of himself when not even one full day of your life had gone by yet, but all the time we were raising you, the thought was in the back of my mind that eventually that day really would come. And now that it has, all I can think is, I’m supposed to be feeling sentimental, not...like this! The least you could do is return the parental affection we’ve shown you!”

“I’m sorry!”

There was not much else I could say to my mother’s extended grumbling. With a wry smile, Julianne provided some support. “Don’t worry, Auntie. From now on, House Flaubert will have to deal with Marielle. Lord Simeon can suffer instead of you and Uncle!”

“Julianne! I thought you were coming to my defense!”

“I have to agree with Lady Julianne,” said Natalie. “I know that whatever terrible mess you cause, my lady, Lord Simeon will come and rescue you.”

I was almost ready to cry. “Natalie, you too!?”

This exchange finally made my mother smile. “Well, it’s true that he’s a very dependable son-in-law, so in that respect I feel quite reassured...but, Julianne, you need to stop with all this nonsense about being a rich man’s second wife and find a proper husband. Clearly your parents can’t be trusted to do it, so

we'll have to take over."

"There's no need for any of that," Julianne replied.

"That's right!" I added. "Julianne has the melon prince!"

"Stop talking in riddles and start getting dressed!" said Mother, her voice striking like a bolt of lightning.

At that moment, a knock came at the door. Natalie was too busy helping me, so Julianne went to open it. I thought it might be someone from the church coming to check on our progress, but instead, three women entered who had the proud beauty of goddesses.

"Apologies for intruding while you're getting changed," said Isabelle. Each of the Three Flowers gave a slight curtsy to the shocked Julianne, then gracefully entered the room. They were wearing much plainer dresses than usual, and their hair was gathered up into neat and demure styles, but they couldn't fully conceal their radiant beauty and allure. Mother and Natalie, too, opened their mouths, dumbfounded.

"Viscountess, I hope you'll forgive our impertinence," said Olga. "We were worried there might not be enough hands to assist the young lady in getting ready, so we thought we'd be so bold as to offer our help."

All three of them curtsied to my mother with an elegance that would not compare unfavorably to that of a royal princess. She forgot to even stand from her chair—her eyes simply turned as round as saucers. "Wha... I... Who...might you be?"

"We have the honor of knowing the young lady here," Olga replied. "We wished to see how she looked as a blushing bride, and we've kindly been allowed to attend the ceremony." As ever, Olga had the air of an intellectual. Her outfit today, which was like that of a governess, suited her surprisingly well.

Isabelle added, "Though it may be audacious of us to offer, please allow us to help get her ready." Isabelle, whose selling point was her unyielding spirit, was also dressed up like a different person. Her eye-catching red hair was firmly covered by a hat.

"Please, leave it to us," said Chloe, darling as always. "Just you wait—we'll

make her into the most dazzling bride you ever did see.” The sweet voice of this little devil could make anyone, man or woman, do her bidding.

My mother nodded wordlessly at the grinning trio, thoroughly overwhelmed by their beauty and sheer presence.

If she knew that they were ladies of the evening from a brothel, no matter how steeped in history and tradition, I’m quite sure she would hit the roof. I had never told my family about my visits to Tarentule. Still, perhaps if they found out after first getting to know them as the finest of ladies, brimming with intelligence and class, perhaps they’d accept them as my friends?

Julianne drew up next to me and spoke in a hushed tone. “Marielle, are these, by any chance, those ‘goddesses’ you’ve told me about? The Three Flowers?”

“That’s right,” I replied. “Aren’t they incredible?”

Julianne’s cheeks turned red and her eyes began to shimmer. “What shall I do? I fear they might cause an awakening in me!”

Wait, hold on a moment! If things go in that direction, His Highness will cry!

The trio came over to me. In a bantering tone, Isabelle said, “We made the right choice, asking to be invited today. You didn’t betray our hopes in the slightest. Another time, you’ll have to tell us what you and Lord Simeon were up to before you got here.”

“Hmm, I wonder how much I’ll be able to say. I have a feeling His Highness might command my silence.”

Chloe pressed me for answers even more suggestively. “I hear you spent a night away from home together? What kind of night did you and Lord Simeon have, I wonder?” Her playful eyes sparkled like glitter.

“I discovered a new side of him,” I replied. “The servant of love. He was *most* adorable!”

“What could that mean?” Isabelle asked. “Well, knowing you, it couldn’t actually be anything too illicit.”

“More likely something we should pity Lord Simeon for,” Chloe agreed.

I looked at them quizzically. “How did you know that?”

“Yes, enough of that.” Olga clapped her hands, putting a stop to our exchange. She put a hand on her hip and scolded us with a teacherly expression. “We can discuss that another time. Right now we have to make Marielle into the world’s finest bride.”

“Oh yes, we certainly do!” said Isabelle.

“Time to use every skill we have!” said Chloe.

Surrounded closely by the three of them, I shrank back a little. I had experienced a similar moment once before. “Today I’d...prefer you not to do *too* much to my face...”

“Don’t worry,” Olga reassured me. “We’ll turn you into the most stunning bride imaginable while maintaining your essence.”

The Three Flowers joined forces with Natalie and expertly polished me up. My disheveled hair was neatly combed, styled, and decorated with a flower.

The closer I got to being ready, the more I began to feel the weight of the event. My mother, too, settled down, and even started to cry a little.

My makeup was applied in a more deliberate manner than usual. My face was definitely my own, not a fraudulent disguise, but the color of my cheeks was more vivacious, emphasizing my youth and innocence. I was put into my wedding dress, which was decorated with many flowers, and my veil was draped over me. There in the mirror stood the happiest young lady in the world.

The white dress, symbolizing purity, had the soft colors of the flowers layered on top of it, creating a remarkably sweet and ornate impression. Finally I was handed my bouquet, and I felt my heart race even faster.

Pale pink, cream, and purple. Those were the hues of the flowers my brother had diligently cultivated for my wedding day. He had said that this combination of gentle colors evoked the idea of love’s awakening, and that it suited me for that reason. It was an uncharacteristically grandiose thing for him to say. Still, even though he was normally far more blunt, I knew he was truly a kind person who cared about his little sister. *Thank you, Gerard.*

Once it was all complete, Natalie cried and said, “My lady, you look wonderful!”

Mother, too, was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, while the Three Flowers looked thoroughly satisfied.

Julianne was staring at me with a spellbound face. While doing so, she said, "By the way, someone from House Flaubert asked me about this earlier, but...where are the wedding rings? We need to provide them already."

I froze for several seconds. "Oh."

"Oh?" Julianne cocked her head in innocent confusion. The others, their eyes still shimmering with emotion, gently laughed and asked what was wrong.

...*Oh.*

I smiled back at them all. It was the only thing I could do.

All of us beamed at one another. Still smiling, I drew back *very* slightly. *Oh. Yes, I forgot to mention that.*

Chapter Fifteen

The doors opened to the sound of solemn organ music.

The red carpet that stretched out before me was adorned with white flowers and ribbons. The guests, sitting in rows on each side of the aisle, did not applaud, but simply watched my arrival with weighty expressions.

Quietly, I took a single step forward. Facing me at the end of this path was the holy altar. Awaiting there were the priest and my beloved.

I was suddenly beset by anxiety. I looked around at all the people. It was exactly how it had looked in my dream the other day. *But...this is real, isn't it? I really am awake, aren't I? This isn't going to be a nightmare come to life, is it!?*

"Marielle!" said my father, who was escorting me, in a whispered rebuke. "What are you doing? You're supposed to look straight ahead."

"Oh, s-sorry, Father. Just to make sure, I am awake, aren't I?"

"Yes, well. *Some of us* didn't get a *wink* of sleep thanks to you."

Though his hair and moustache had been groomed to gentlemanly perfection, dark circles stood out visibly under his eyes. *I'm sorry for being the kind of daughter who made you worry right up to the last moment!* But I was sure everyone just thought he was a father crying as he prepared to give his daughter away.

Side by side with my father, I slowly walked down the aisle. One step, then another, bringing me ever closer to my love.

"It still leaves me slightly uneasy that a daughter like you is marrying into an earldom," he whispered. "I don't know if you'll adjust properly. You were expecting to have a more plain and down-to-earth life as well, weren't you?"

Father was the one who had brought Lord Simeon into my life, and yet he was the one saying this. *But after all, Father actually asked Lord Simeon if he might be able to introduce me to one of his subordinates. Father never dreamed of*

reeling in the man himself.

At the time I had been very surprised as well. Mother and Gerard, and even the servants, were also in a state of disbelief. None of them were confident that we would actually get married.

But...it's all right.

"I don't have to do it alone. Lord Simeon is there with me, and we're facing our new life together. And everyone else in his family will help to look after me as well—Countess Estelle, Earl Maximilian, Lord Adrien, and Lord Noel. There's no need to worry. I'm just one more addition to a fine family."

Still looking forward, Father laughed softly. "Even so, I can't help it. But, well, your greatest virtue is your ability to be optimistic and find enjoyment at any moment. I'm sure you'll enjoy your new life just as much, and my new son-in-law seems to understand you very well. Still, if you have any troubles, please talk to me. We may not amount to much, but we are still your family too."

I kept looking straight ahead as well, but nestled my face against my father's arm. "Thank you, Father. To me, you're the best family in the world. You, Mother, and Gerard."

We were fast approaching the end of the aisle. The members of both families were arranged in the frontmost pews. My brother and Lord Adrien appeared to have arrived safely. They sat there with perfectly straight faces, as if none of that great fuss had occurred at all.

Lord Simeon was waiting and looking toward me.

He was wearing the formal dress uniform of the Royal Order of Knights. It was white adorned with gold and silver, and the epaulettes on his shoulders were decorated with gold fringes. From there, a sash crossed diagonally down to his waist, while at his chest, a medal shone proudly.

Unlike his regular uniform, which was also impressive but put an emphasis on function, this ceremonial uniform included not military boots, but dress shoes. His pale blond hair was styled with pomade, revealing his handsome face, currently without his glasses. Today he was neither the Demon Vice Captain nor the black-hearted military officer, but the Prince Charming any maiden would

dream of. His facial expression was blurry from a distance, and the veil obscured my vision as well, but he became clearer and clearer as I got closer to him.

His eyes, too, were shining brilliantly with joy.

My father let go of me, and Lord Simeon's gloved hand took hold of mine. We did not exchange any words, but simply smiled at one another. Quietly sharing our happiness, we turned to face the altar.

Now the organist played a different piece, and the congregation sang, their voices reverberating throughout the church. Once the hymn had finished, the priest announced the start of the ceremony and led everyone in a prayer to God.

Then the ceremony proceeded, with the priest asking us the all-important questions. "Do you, Simeon Flaubert..."

We exchanged our vows without a hitch. "In that case," said the priest as the best man stepped forward, "please proceed with the exchanging of the glasses."

Instantly, a voiceless commotion rose up behind us. I understood it without needing to turn around. The guests were doubting their ears, I was sure. They were wondering, "Did he just say what I thought he said?" The sound of everyone shifting about was almost deafening. I even heard His Highness mutter, "Glasses? What sort of poppycock is this?"

Even the organist couldn't keep from turning around and making an odd face. The priest willfully avoided the slightest acknowledgment that anything was amiss, but the best man, when he approached, had a weary look of bewilderment all over his face. Sitting on the silk cushion he presented were two brand new pairs of glasses: the special pairs that hid secret symbols only the two of us knew about.

Lord Simeon lifted my veil. Nothing separated us any longer, and we smiled very slightly nervously at one another. *We'll have the rings remade soon. I'm sure Valery and Claude will make wonderful pieces for us again.*

Lord Simeon placed my glasses onto my face. They were cool to the touch. My

vision became perfectly clear, and I could finally see every detail of my beloved's form. *My very own handsome prince.* As I gazed at him, enchanted, I took his pair into my hands.

Lord Simeon bent down slightly and I put them on him. There was the look I was used to. He regained a tiny bit of that black-hearted flavor. *He really does look better with his glasses on. I can't get enough of those eyes that are cold and intellectual, but also hide a passion that could melt anything. I love him more than anything in the world. I will love him forever, until the ends of the earth.*

Urged by the priest, we kissed one another. Our new glasses collided, as if exchanging vows of their own.



“With this, the marriage is sealed. I hereby pronounce you man and wife. May this covenant be protected by God and forever blessed.”

Flower petals rained. Congratulatory bells rang out as we left the church. As we walked together, a glorious sky spread out before us.

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon, “when I first saw you, you were but a girl, with youth still remaining. I was entertained by your strange behavior, and also slightly worried by it. From then on, I watched over you. Ever since we decided that we would marry, I’ve aimed to be your protector.”

His kind gaze focused on me intently.

“But there have been times when it felt as though I was the one being protected. Though you may seem reckless, you’re actually a very strong person. You always look straight ahead, never wavering. Even when you make a mistake, even when you’re knocked down, you persistently stand back up again, no matter what. You’re flexible enough to accept all sorts of things for what they are and take them in your stride. With that strength, that light, you save my heart and protect me. I may be a pathetic husband, being protected by my wife who is nine years younger than me, but even so—”

He cut short what he had been about to say, then thought for a moment and continued.

“No, I swear that I will be a husband you can be proud of. Please, teach me how to live more flexibly. How to live a life where I can make mistakes, then be strong enough to stand back up again. And...I want us to be a family where we protect one another. Marielle, let’s give each other a life we can enjoy.”

It wasn’t a request, but a statement of intent. *Yes, we are husband and wife now. From now on, we’ll share everything. I’ll be able to live my life more strongly because I have him, too. God also says we should support one another as a couple.*

“I would love to,” I replied with a smile and an enthusiastic nod. “There’s no one I could ever fangirl over more than you. Please, let me stay by your side and watch you forever and ever.”

I caught a look of surprise in the light blue eyes behind his glasses. He

remembered, I was sure. It was exactly what I had said after he proposed to me for the second time. However, the emotion behind the words was quite different now. This time, I was sure the true meaning behind them would reach him properly.

We looked at one another, then burst into laughter at the same time. What started as a gentle chortle soon became louder, both of us erupting with joy. Lord Simeon vigorously embraced me and lifted me up.

“Being the object of your ‘fangirling’ is a blessing and a curse!” said Lord Simeon.

“A curse?”

“I’m going to spend my entire life being described as brutal and black-hearted! I must be the only husband in the world whose wife’s terms of endearment for him include ‘black-hearted’!”

He spun me around and I started to feel giddy. I put my arms around his neck and replied, laughing all the while, “No, as you grow older and become even more menacing, maybe you’ll change into a ‘Demon King’!”

“I didn’t realize there were further levels. I wonder what I’ll call you when we reach that point.”

“Originally you compared me to an insect, didn’t you? In which case, I’ll aim to sprout wings and become a beautiful butterfly.”

Chuckling ruefully, Lord Simeon shook his head. “No, that will never do. At the best of times, there are already far too many men with their eyes on you. It would make me far too anxious. Please, remain an insect that stays in the forest, camouflaged as you flit around, buzzing ‘fangirl, fangirl’!”

“How unfair!”

“I like being the only one who can find you and catch you.”

His sweet eyes came closer. We had kissed each other many, many times by now, and there would be countless kisses in our future.

I loved him. He loved me. Everything is irreplaceably precious, and everything is shining gloriously.

To the past that brought us here... To the future with you that I cannot wait to experience...

To everything in the world, I give blessings and thanks!

The Calling Card of Lutin the Mysterious Thief

“If we meet again, you have to tell me your real name!”

Such cruel innocence, the man thought. She doesn't even know that there are people in this world who don't have so much as a name. She believes that children are all special creatures whose parents give them a name, and love, and affection.

Even if she could exchange words with him, even if they could reach out and touch one another, he and she lived in entirely different worlds. He found it very sweet, but sometimes he also wished he could pull her over to his side, sully her by showing her his world—an unseemly and indecent world. *How delightful it would be to smear her pretty white hands with blood and dirt.*

But, while thinking that, all he could actually do was wave back with an insipid smile. *How kind you are,* he told himself mockingly.

“Your real name?” said the Easdalian gentleman standing beside him on the balcony. The gentleman's eyes shone like the sun, and he wore a carefree disposition.

Much like the young lady, the Easdalian had a good lineage, but unlike her, he knew about all sorts of different worlds. He seemed to have guessed at some of the hidden details that the man did not talk about. Sensing that his searching gaze contained something like consideration for him, the man felt somewhat uncomfortable. *The little boy who wanted sympathy is long gone. It can hardly do me any good at this late stage.*

With the young lady about to race off, the Easdalian waved to her, then feigned indifference and changed the subject. The man had no objections to this attitude—to the avoidance of rudely butting into other people's business. “Did you already report these latest events to Prince Liberto?” asked the Easdalian.

“More or less,” the man replied. “Though I doubt my message has arrived

yet.”

“In other words, the deal with Lagrange was made at your own discretion? Are you certain Prince Liberto will approve?”

“He won’t exactly have a choice,” the man replied, shrugging his shoulders. *In all likelihood, it will sour his mood completely and he’ll give me rather a hard time over it.* The man knew that, but if he had waited for a response, it would have been too late. For the sake of the young lady, who was trying to somehow resolve all this in time for her wedding, there had been no choice but to take decisive action and ask forgiveness rather than permission.

In truth, though, he was rather frustrated with himself. *What am I doing? If the wedding had been canceled, wouldn’t that have been exactly what I wanted?* There was a limit to being such a pushover, and the man was sure that he should have reached that limit well before assisting in a way that was sure to incite his master’s rage.

A commotion could be heard from below. A woman in a red military uniform was shouting angrily at the Easdalian gentleman. The solicitude that had appeared on his face when observing the man softened now; he returned to his usual playful expression and greeted her in an upbeat manner.

By the time the man looked back to where the young lady had been, her horse had already shot off like an arrow. She and her fiancé flew out of the gate in a straight line, not even turning back to look at him again. They were heading toward a bright future, as was appropriate for them.

As the man watched them go, his heart was conflicted in every sense. Though it was intensely irritating, there was a part of him that thought it was for the best. Despite how taken with her the man was, he knew he wasn’t suitable for her. It wasn’t a matter of status or lineage. The worlds they lived in were simply too different. It was a gap that mere love could not hope to bridge.

She belonged with that rich boy. Neither of them had any hint of shadow in them, so it was better if they walked the path of light together, cuddling up with one another like perfect little dolls. The difference in rank that she so often mentioned was, from the man’s point of view, laughably insignificant. *They may be different flowers, but they’re both carefully cultivated, aren’t they? I doubt*

they even know of the existence of waterweeds growing in a muddy bog.

Ugh. It's an ignorance of the world. She is innocent and ignorant, and stubbornly pure. No matter how much he thought about it, it felt inconceivable that she and the man could ever belong together. Flowers set down their roots in a flower garden, while waterweeds floated in the bog. They couldn't be swapped around or brought together.

Only...knowing her, even that difference might have seemed like nothing from her point of view. Perhaps a flower could pull up its own roots and start walking. She has a strange power that makes even the impossible feel so very possible.

Even though he had only meant it as a metaphor, he began to imagine the sight of a flower walking around. It was bizarre, but amusing. That strange image was somehow very befitting of her. *If that could happen, then maybe a waterweed, too, could creep out of the bog.* He laughed thinking about this silly idea.

He was entirely out of sorts. Ever since he had met that young lady, he had started behaving very unlike himself. A particular catalyst for this had been her fiancé, who practically drove him mad.

He had hated that rich boy from the very first time they had met. He was a pretty doll with a perfect upbringing who had never known hardship in his life. He was popular with the ladies, but for a fellow man he was a source of great antipathy. It would have been much easier if he could be dismissed as a pampered prince who knew nothing about the world, but it was intently irritating that his skills, if nothing else, were so ludicrously impressive.

No matter how perfectly I disguise myself, he sees through me at a glance. I had never imagined he might be identifying people based on their skeletal structure! And when it comes to physical strength, I can't measure up in the slightest. He sees through all my plans based on only the slightest shred of information. What a thoroughly repellent man. If you're going to be a pampered little rich boy, at least stick to that and be suitably lacking in talent.

When the two of them had been forced to walk through the mirror maze together, the man had found it impossible to contain his annoyance.

"Vice Captain, what are you doing?"

Hanging in mid-air, the man looked up with some vexation. The rich boy was preventing him from falling by bracing his limbs against the surrounding walls.

Though the mirror maze had seemed merely disorienting, it was also equipped with fiendish traps like an old tomb. Normally the man would have noticed something unnatural about the floor, but instead he had fallen straight into a pitfall trap. Or rather, he would have if not for the rich boy saving him—which itself baffled him.

“Perhaps you could stop your prattling and climb back up,” said the rich boy. “I can’t hold you for much longer.”

“Don’t lie,” the man replied. “I can see on your face that you could lift me up with one hand.”

“Why should I have to put in all that effort for you of all people? The least you can do is climb up on your own.” The rich boy’s face was irritatingly composed as he voiced his complaints.

Scoffing, the man shifted his body and kicked the wall, using the force to leap back onto solid ground. Even the impact of that was not enough to stagger the rich boy. *He must have been trained exceptionally stringently, especially for a nobleman. But I’m sure if I said that to him, he’d blithely answer that it’s obvious he was trained hard—he’s in the military. Ugh, he really is odious. I especially hated it when he told me to climb up on my own, but then synchronized his timing with mine and pulled me up after all.*

“Should I be thanking you, I wonder? I never expected you of all people to save me, Vice Captain.”

“If I’d left you there I doubt you would have been in any particular danger, but I didn’t want to give the duke any excuse to claim victory. He probably won’t acknowledge our success unless all of us reach the underground room.”

The rich boy adjusted his glasses as he gave this blunt reply. The man did not believe for a moment that he had really thought about it in such great detail.

“And,” the rich boy added in a murmur, “Marielle wouldn’t have liked it.”

The man immediately felt the energy drain from his body. With a certain desperation he suggested, “Then perhaps if we want to ensure we make it

there together, we should hold hands?”

The rich boy turned to him with an intense look of reluctance.

The man said, “How many times have you taken a wrong turn so far, Vice Captain? Holding another man’s hand is a deeply unpleasant idea for me, too, but to show my gratitude for your help just now, I’ll lead you the rest of the way.”

Contrary to the man’s expectation that this suggestion might immediately be rejected, treated as a joke, the rich boy appeared very torn. He paused a moment, and then, with a very unwilling expression—his forehead deeply creased—he offered out his hand. “Please.”

Accepting help meant admitting his own inability to handle the situation, which would have been difficult for someone of his age and social rank. Not to mention that the man he was about to hold hands with was his romantic rival.

Even if he understood that it was the right choice, I’d have expected him to reject it. So for him to accept my help so straightforwardly means that he fought back his inner conflict, recognizing that it was not a sign of weakness, of dependence, but the most appropriate step to take in this situation. The rich boy had shown a side of himself that the man would not have anticipated from a proud nobleman. The man sighed internally. *He continues to be revolting.*

“Understood. This makes us even, then.”

The two men held hands in a companionable manner and walked on, neither looking at the other. During the short journey to the goal, the rich boy appeared to be thoroughly drained of his spirit. The man, on the other hand, had the urge to burst out laughing. His annoyance dissipated and he returned to his normal sense of ease. He had absolutely no desire to comfort the rich boy, who was rapidly sinking into a depressive stupor, but he resigned himself to accompanying him until the end. It was unlike the man, but it wasn’t a bad feeling.

Under no circumstances would he admit to liking the young lady’s fiancé...but perhaps he was forced to accept him as more than a mere rich boy.

“But I’m still not ready to wave the white flag,” he said to himself as he

watched from the balcony.

He had been on the verge of giving up, of simply standing aside and supporting them as a couple, but at the very, very end she had overturned that decision. She had smiled at him—the most dazzling smile in the world—and suddenly there had been no gap between them at all. The waterweed in the bog became no more than an illusion, disappearing in the light of her innocent smile.

Because of that alone, I cannot give up. I won't back down, no matter what they say. It's her fault for being too cute. It's normal for an insect like me to be drawn to such a shining light, isn't it?

"Vice Captain," he muttered to himself in an upbeat tone, "don't be under the illusion that once you're married, you're out of danger. A thief doesn't care about trivial matters like that."

Then he turned his back on the knight, who was rapidly shrinking into the distance. First he had to take care of the job he still had in progress, and then he had to placate his master.

But one day... One day...

The aloof figure disappeared into the building. As of yet, no one else knew about the warning he had secretly left behind.

Afterword

It's book four. At last their wedding has arrived. I'm Haruka Momo. Hello there.

It's a huge relief to finally write about the happy wedding of these two mushy lovebirds—the obsessive geek and the knight in eyeglasses whose lives are full of chaos. I've written every book as though it could be the last, but I always wanted to depict their wedding if I could, so I'm endlessly grateful to be able to reach this point. As always, this is thanks to the tireless efforts of the publisher, Ichijinsha, the artist, Maro, who drew such charming illustrations, and the many readers who have lent their support. Allow me to say a huge thank you to everyone.

I wrote this book with the singular goal of reaching a good stopping point for the story, so I tried to call back to a lot of key phrases from the past and aimed for an all-star cast reunion. There were some characters I wasn't able to bring back, but I think I did a pretty good job, all things considered. Maro's illustrations were also fantastic and helped the book feel extra sweet and lovely. Leaving aside all the trials and tribulations they faced in the middle, the end of the book is a definite happy ending. As the author, I'm happy as well to have arrived at the conclusion I had imagined.

That said, I wasn't sure about the feeling that it was all wrapped up with a perfect bow, so I wrote the customary end-of-book short story. When I was deciding who to write about, I realized I had still never written from Lutin's point of view. I thought it might be interesting to cover the part of the story where we lost sight of him, and this is how it turned out. It featured Simeon, who had full HP as usual but was severely drained of mental energy.

In this book I showed Lord Simeon's uncool side, and I was slightly worried about what reaction that would get. The male love interest is supposed to be cool and dashing. Still, he is human, so he's supposed to have flaws as well. After all, when you're married, the negative aspects of your spouse stand out all

the more. I feel like a relationship that endures despite that is the “real thing.”

Of course, when it comes to Marielle, there’s nothing to worry about. Now that she and Simeon are married, they’ll probably stay on the path of being a lovey-dovey couple. I have all sorts of ideas for what to write about their highly eventful honeymoon, Marielle’s early days as a young wife, and supplementary stories about supporting characters and past events that I can’t fit into the main series. Hopefully I can make you smile again with stories like that.

One last thing. Incredibly enough, my story has been turned into a manga! Alaskapan has adapted it into a fun and exciting manga series. Now there’s a fully illustrated version of *Marielle Clarac* to read that’s filled to the brim with a different kind of charm than the novels. I hope you’ll enjoy seeing the world of Marielle and friends unfold in a whole new way, just like I am!

—Haruka Momo

September 2018

Bonus Short Stories

Marielle

Back when the ground was still covered with snow, Lord Simeon and I visited the cafe that was the talk of the town.

“My word,” I remarked. “It’s full of couples.”

The newly opened department store cafe was full of young men and women sitting together, staring lovingly at one another as they exchanged words of endearment. To each pair, the world outside their own table had ceased to matter.

Lord Simeon looked around, then shrank back. His voice full of reluctance, he asked, “Are you quite certain about this?”

A waiter noticed us and headed in our direction. I held on tightly to Lord Simeon’s arm and looked up at him with a sweet and innocent expression. “We’re about to be shown to our table. Let’s not dawdle.”

With my smile, I silently asked him, *You can’t possibly mean to flee when we’ve come all this way, can you?*

Deep ridges formed on his forehead, but he sighed in resignation.

Internally, I chuckled to myself. After all, Lord Simeon was the one who had proposed today’s excursion. He had made it quite clear that he would take me wherever I wanted and do whatever made me happiest.

We ordered hot tea and some ice cream—and though only one bowl of ice cream was presented to us, it was accompanied by two spoons. This was the very reason for today’s trip. The couples around us had all ordered the same confection served in the same manner. Yes, we had visited so that we might personally experience the latest trend amongst lovers in Sans-Terre.

The ice cream was strewn with chestnut and cookie pieces and drizzled with chocolate sauce. “Doesn’t it look delicious?”

I immediately picked up my spoon and scooped up a mouthful. However, I didn't eat it myself, but rather offered it to Lord Simeon. "Open wide."

His pale, handsome face turned red in an instant. "Feel free to have some first. I don't mind waiting."

"Oh, but I can only eat it if it's served to me by your hands. I scooped this up especially for you, Lord Simeon."

He tried in vain to resist, but I fought back with a beaming grin. He was well aware that the nature of the trend was that he and I had to feed each other. That was the very thing that was *en vogue*. I had asked to do exactly this, and I wasn't about to let him wriggle out of it now.

He emitted a choking sound and the color in his cheeks grew even deeper. At last he resigned himself and opened his mouth. I lifted the spoon up to his well-formed lips and into his mouth. My heart pounded as he swallowed the ice cream.

It was one single mouthful. It barely took a second. And yet, the image of it held tremendous destructive power. This princely young man, blessed with good looks, whose glasses made him appear quite the intellectual and whose physique was well-honed from years in the military, was eating ice cream that I had fed to him. He had opened his mouth and swallowed it like a tiny child. *That glaring contradiction! That darling cuteness! My fangirl fire is blazing fiercely! How can I help but find such intense appeal in a magnificently incongruous sight like this? Vice Captain, you are second to none!*

Defeated by the destructive power of him eating one single spoonful, I felt an impulse to fall down onto my face. If we were in private, I would have had no qualms about expressing all of my enthusiasm. At this point, I would have been pounding violently on the table. Instead, I was merely trembling in a fangirl fever.

Lord Simeon took a reproachful look at me, then picked up his own spoon and used it to retrieve some ice cream. He thrust it toward me with such vigor that he seemed to be demanding I eat it.

Goodness gracious! Isn't that a little too much? Is he attempting to ensure that this ends as quickly as possible?

“I couldn’t possibly fit that much in my mouth all at once, Lord Simeon! Are you suggesting I should stretch my mouth open in an entirely uncouth manner?”

I turned my head away just as a lady should at such a notion. *Yes, on my own I’d certainly be able to stuff that much into my mouth, but not in a public cafe. Despite my other qualities, I am still a viscount’s daughter.*

With a remorseful expression, Lord Simeon returned some of the ice cream to the bowl. When he presented the spoon to me again, this time I obediently accepted it. At first it felt cold on my tongue, then it melted smoothly. Finally, the delicious sweetness struck me. *I’m fangirling over this as well! There can surely be no greater happiness than being fed by Lord Simeon! My heart is pounding!*

This continued back and forth for a short while. Soon I realized that a number of people nearby were staring at us. At that moment it was my turn to feed Lord Simeon. I held the spoon out for him again. As he desperately struggled to restrain his embarrassment, the eyes of all the young ladies in the cafe appeared to sparkle. I exchanged glances with a few of them. We nodded at one another, understanding implicitly without a word. *A gentleman blushing in such an adorable manner is a precious treasure indeed! I won’t let him escape!*

The emotions that spark such fangirling can truly bring people’s hearts together. How wonderful that is. Once I fed Lord Simeon the very last mouthful, he sighed in relief, glad that it was over at last. As I grinned, he glared at me—but then he suddenly took my chin in hand and brought his face closer.

“You appear to have some sauce on your face.”

He removed it from my face with a kiss. I froze at this sneak attack. The light blue eyes behind his glasses pierced through me, and his handsome face smiled in a suggestive and villainous fashion.

I screamed inside. *Is this his revenge? It’s more like a reward! Truly the wicked scheme of a brutal black-hearted military officer! Here lies Marielle Clarac—dead from fangirling.*

Afterwards, he suffered an immense amount of teasing from Captain Poisson about this event. I suppose Lord Simeon hadn’t entirely reckoned with the fact

that he was in public, where other people could see. It was only natural that word got out.

I, too, made full use of this valuable experience for my next book, of course. When I jokingly suggested that I could thank him for this by taking him somewhere to eat, he practically collapsed where he stood—but no one else needed to know about that.

Simeon

In matters of love and romance, I could never hope to compete with Marielle. Despite a difference of nine years between us, I cannot help but be overwhelmed and defeated at every turn. What else can one expect when a boorish military officer is engaged to an author of romance novels?

However, when it comes to knowledge of more physical matters, the opposite applies. Marielle is the sort of young lady who believes she knows rather a lot, but none of it is based on personal experience. Rather, her knowledge is limited to the superficial details she has been able to glean from countless books and snippets of gossip. As a result, she feels as though she understands what it means for a man and a woman to love one another, but she lacks any awareness of a rather fundamental detail.

In this regard—perhaps this regard only—she is exactly what one would expect of a young lady from a good family. This in itself may be the reason for her lack of any shyness or restraint.

As I pored over a business report, Marielle came up behind me and nestled closely. “Of course, we definitely need to have a son as an heir, but they do say it can be lovely to have a girl first. I hope our children are as pretty as you, Lord Simeon. I pray to God every day that they don’t resemble me.”

She expressed herself as though she was describing maiden-like dreams that involve restraining oneself and waiting for marriage, but this was not the case. Lamentably, she was in fact making rather bold comments about how eager she was to conceive.

I turned over the page and spoke without looking around. “I can’t say I mind

either way. In any case, we are not yet blessed with child.”

She stiffened, still leaning on my back. “Is that so? But....we slept together the other day, didn’t we?”

“Slept together, yes.” Only slept. Soundly. And, honestly speaking, only Marielle had slept.

“Why, then? Oh, perhaps it only works if you stay together until morning? Of course! If it were possible to conceive a child in such a short space of time, ladies of the evening would always be pregnant.”

How thoroughly should I respond to that? How much should I tell her? It was common practice amongst upper-class families that an unmarried girl not be told the slightest thing about carnal matters, but this incomplete knowledge seemed worse than none at all. I had the feeling it might be better to tell her sooner rather than later.

However, I did not have the courage to do it myself.

If I told her, I had absolutely no doubt that she would demand to put it into practice. Not having a full understanding of the ins and outs, so to speak, would make her curiosity run rampant.

I was not entirely confident that I would be able to flatly refuse her in such a case. For that, I was ashamed of myself.

“Isn’t that right, Lord Simeon?”

She continued to cling to my back and plead sweetly. If I turned around now, it would all be over. I determinedly fought my urges.

Instead, I replied, “If you become pregnant before the wedding, your family will be the laughingstock of society. Surely you don’t want to have anything to feel guilty about? Wouldn’t you rather walk proudly along the path of purity?”

She groaned. “There are still three more months. That’s such a long time.”

Her ticklish breath on my neck made me want to weep.

Remember this, Marielle. In three months’ time, I’ll teach you more thoroughly than you can bear. I’ll give you all the personal experience you could ever wish for, so be ready!

This was an afternoon that made me feel a little distressed in the face of the three months I still had to endure.







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Translated by Philip Reuben Edited by Linda Lombardi

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2020